

PURLOINED POETICS: THE GROTESQUE IN THE MUSIC OF  
MAURICE RAVEL

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Music and the  
faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy.

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PURLOINED POETICS: THE GROTESQUE IN THE MUSIC OF  
MAURICE RAVEL

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Date approved: 6 April 2009

*To Michael and Rebecca*

Mahalo nui loa

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Early on, I wondered if my experience writing a dissertation would resemble the fictional Jack Burden's, who entered a period of inert semi-consciousness known as "the Great Sleep." Faced with the prospect of completing his dissertation, Jack slept fourteen or fifteen hours a night; when he finally woke, it was to contemplate this thought: "*If I don't get up I can't go back to bed.*"<sup>1</sup>

I was fortunate to have better reasons for getting up in the morning. Those reasons begin with my dissertation advisor, Roberta Freund Schwartz, a scholar of Renaissance music and the blues; she shepherded my project with such care and conviction that anyone not looking closely would think I was writing about Robert Johnson, not Ravel. Roberta encouraged me to strive for greater clarity by sloughing off the stylistic and scholarly accretions that cling to graduate students like barnacles. I am grateful for her patience and conscientious attention to my writing, as well as her sustained enthusiasm for this project; her dedication is inspiring.

My students at Washburn University kept me occupied with the practical things of this world, ensuring that I was never too caught up in esotericism to forget the symbiotic relationship of research and teaching. I taught three courses a semester

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1982), 189.

at Washburn from the time I submitted my dissertation prospectus, and I would not have had it any other way. I treasure the years I spent with these creative and industrious students, for whom I will always hold a deep affection. My Washburn colleagues provided encouragement and support throughout the writing process; they are inspiring performers, teachers, and leaders whose collegiality was the first of many lessons I learned from them.

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My parents brought their island wild child from the Hawaiian tropics to an arid Navajo Indian Reservation, where I roamed the hills behind our trailer, searching for evidence of lost civilizations in the soil. I owe my parents many things, but chief among them is their willingness to let me wander, unobserved, that I might grow curious about the world around me. I grew up in a home that valued learning and the power of words, both spoken and written, but these would have mattered little without the gifts of love, faith, and confidence that they imparted to me. It is humbling to think of the sacrifices they made on my behalf, and to imagine how I might repay my debt of gratitude. My childhood was brightened and my professional burdens eased by the support of my siblings, Carrie, Samantha, and Benjamin.

To my husband, Hayden, I write what may seem inscrutable to some readers. You have not yet read this dissertation; I doubt that you ever will. But this is the tender mystery between us: you never need to read my words to understand my thoughts. Your love and support are offered not for an achievement, a performance, an impressive feather in my cap. They are just for me.

Another leg complete in our great adventure, with open skies ahead.

Leawood, Kansas  
14 February 2009

## **ABSTRACT**

For scholars, the significance of Ravel's music and the nature of his artistic legacy remain elusive. Many question why a composer with Ravel's gifts would cling to convention—conservative forms, tertian harmonies—in an era of musical revolution. Ravel's music is often characterized with incongruous terms: ironic, artificial, sensual, objective, calculated, novel, precious, decadent, cold, and impressionistic. Scholars have worked around the problem of Ravel's style by examining the transitory masks donned throughout his career: the fakir, the neo-classicist, the ironist. I submit, however, that the grotesque functions as a recurrent aesthetic theme, permeating Ravel's layers of illusion and revealing disruptive forces at play that unify apparently different musical styles and subvert the apparent conservatism in his music.

Though scholars have disagreed about the precise nature of the grotesque, most acknowledge that its fundamental characteristic is a unity among disjunction achieved by transgressing boundaries and fusing opposites. At the same time, scholars acknowledge that the grotesque is not a transhistorical phenomenon, since it assumes various meanings in different eras and cultures. The grotesque's transgressive character prevents its identification through taxonomies, which is why I

attempt no definition of the phenomenon. Instead, I note instances when a viewer or listener interacts emotionally, psychologically, or physiologically with a work in a manner that evokes disorientation, confusion, or conflict.

Because the grotesque tolerates and even promotes contradiction while maintaining formal cohesion, its utility for interpreting Ravel's music is immediately apparent. Beyond its efficacy as a modern analytical tool, the grotesque is a phenomenon with which Ravel was acquainted. The composer applied the term to the titles of two works—*Sérénade grotesque* and the “Danse grotesque” from *Daphnis et Chloé*—and to the description of automata in *L'Heure espagnole*.

I characterize the French grotesque by examining Hugo's 1827 preface to *Cromwell*, Théophile Gautier's *Les Grotesques*, Baudelaire's essay, “De l'essence du rire,” and Berlioz's *Les Grotesques de la musique* before turning to the tales and criticism of Poe—a juncture where Ravel and the French grotesque meet. The four Ravel works that I examine represent a chronological span of twenty-seven years, from the composer's student days to the era following the first World War. Each work—*Sérénade grotesque*, *L'Heure espagnole*, *Daphnis et Chloé*, and *La Valse*—exhibits disjunctive relationships between music, text, rhythm and meter, and gesture; these, combined with the works' reception histories, evoke the grotesque's characteristic unity among disjunction.

I propose that the grotesque serves three functions in Ravel's music: 1) it provides an aesthetic framework for interpreting (not reconciling) Ravel's diverse



musical styles; 2) it offers a new context for his long-standing appreciation of Poe; and 3) it unveils transgressive elements within conventional musical structures.

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## **PART I**

## INTRODUCTION

At the time of his death in December 1937, Maurice Ravel was the most celebrated composer in France. For scholars, however, the significance of Ravel's music and the nature of his artistic legacy remain elusive. Many question why a composer with Ravel's gifts would cling to convention—conservative forms, tertian harmonies—in an era of musical revolution. Attempts to characterize Ravel's "conservative" style tend to employ a cadre of incongruous terms: ironic, artificial, sensual, objective, calculated, novel, precious, decadent, cold, and impressionistic, to name a few. Some of these descriptions were first voiced by Ravel's critics and supporters, and others by the composer himself through interviews and written commentaries. With such divergent assessments forming the substratum of present studies, interpreting Ravel's musical and aesthetic interests remains a provocative challenge that stubbornly yields its secrets.

Most life-and-works studies divide the composer's music into either three periods (student works to 1905, 1905-1918/20, 1920 forward) or two (roughly pre-war and post-war), marking evolutions in Ravel's influences, harmonic language, and aesthetic orientation. The documentary basis for Ravel studies was established by Roland-Manuel, Ravel's student and first major biographer, and continued by the

American scholar, Arbie Orenstein.<sup>2</sup> In the seventy years since Ravel's death, dozens of biographies of varying quality have chronicled everything from the composer's literary interests to his personal grooming habits; notable among these are works by Vladimir Jankélévitch, Roger Nichols, and Marcel Marnat.<sup>3</sup> A few studies completed in the past five years, including Gurminder Bhogal's dissertation on rhythm and ornament and Michael Puri's comprehensive study of memory in *Daphnis et Chloé*, have started to address significant deficiencies in Ravel scholarship.<sup>4</sup> The most recent guide to Ravel research includes nearly three hundred pages of citations for articles, biographies, dissertations, reviews, and character studies on topics ranging from Ravel's music, aesthetics, and orchestrational technique to his medical conditions, genealogical heritage, and sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

Yet despite their breadth, Ravel studies seem to have settled into a holding pattern indicative of Edgar Allan Poe's maxim: "In one case out of a hundred a point is excessively discussed because it is obscure; in the ninety-nine remaining it is

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<sup>2</sup> Roland-Manuel produced several short studies and essays during Ravel's lifetime, which culminated in his *À la gloire de Ravel* (Paris: Nouvelle revue critique, 1938); see the English edition under the title *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947). Arbie Orenstein's works include a biography and a translated collection of Ravel's writings. See Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975) and Orenstein, ed., *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003). For the French edition, see *Maurice Ravel: lettres, écrits, entretiens*, *Écrits de musiciens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> See Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Maurice Ravel* (Paris: Seuil, 1939); English translation is titled *Ravel*, trans. Margaret Crosland (New York: Grove, 1959); Roger Nichols, *Ravel*, Master Musician Series (London: Dent, 1977); Marcel Marnat, *Maurice Ravel* (Paris: Fayard, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> See Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, "Arabesque and Metric Dissonance in the Music of Maurice Ravel (1905-1914)" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2004); also Michael Puri, "Theorizing Memory in Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Zank, *Maurice Ravel: A Guide to Research* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

obscure because excessively discussed.”<sup>6</sup> Ravel’s reputation as a paradoxical master of pastiche continues to dominate his legacy; as a result, those few Ravel topics that seem conspicuously straightforward are accepted as commonplace, frequently mentioned but rarely interrogated. Ravel’s interest in Edgar Allan Poe is one such topic—an influence long known but little understood.

The confusion surrounding Ravel’s music exists in part because the composer was so versatile and yet so masterfully adept at remaining himself. In fact, it is precisely the nature of Ravel’s musical “self” that lies at the crux of the problem. Much of Ravel scholarship to date has worked around this problem by examining the transitory masks Ravel donned throughout his career: the fakir, the neo-classicist, the ironist. Such an approach has a certain value for a composer like Ravel, who carefully guarded his privacy and addressed even his closest friends with the formal “vous.” Yet I submit that recurrent, invariable themes permeate Ravel’s layers of illusion, revealing disruptive forces at play that subvert the apparent conservatism in his music. One such theme, the grotesque, may help unify Ravel’s seemingly disparate musical styles and offer new interpretations of his most elusive works.

### **The Grotesque**

As an aesthetic phenomenon, the grotesque appears in literary and art historical discussions of a wide range of works, from prehistoric cave paintings and

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<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Rationale of Verse,” in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 14, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 210.

Renaissance frescoes to the comedies of the *commedia dell'arte* and the works of Franz Kafka. The term “grotesque” first appeared in late-fifteenth-century Italy, when Renaissance artists described the ornamental art found in the newly excavated Roman Golden Palace as “grottesche,” meaning simply “of a grotto” or “underground.”<sup>7</sup> Over time, “grotesque” has come to signify figures combining man and beast, sinister characters with comic traits, comic characters with sinister traits, and a host of other contradictory hybrids. Wolfgang Kayser’s foundational study notes the difficulty in attempting to define the grotesque, which cannot be classified according to visual cues; rather, it gains identity when a viewer interacts emotionally, psychologically, or physiologically with a work.<sup>8</sup> Although scholars disagree about the precise nature of the grotesque, most acknowledge that its fundamental characteristic is a unity among disjunction achieved by transgressing boundaries and fusing opposites.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, scholars recognize that the grotesque is not a transhistorical phenomenon, since it assumes various meanings in different cultures and eras.

Because the grotesque tolerates and even promotes contradiction while maintaining formal cohesion, its utility for interpreting Ravel’s music is immediately apparent. Beyond its efficacy as a modern analytical tool, the grotesque is a

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 23-27.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 180-181.

<sup>9</sup> Many modern interpretations of the grotesque continue to derive from John Ruskin’s work on the subject. See Ruskin, “Grotesque Renaissance,” in *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 3 (Boston: Dana Estes, 1913), 113-165.

phenomenon with which Ravel was well-acquainted, having applied “grotesque” to the titles of two works: *Sérénade grotesque*<sup>10</sup> and the “Danse grotesque” from *Daphnis et Chloé*. Ravel also evoked the term when discussing a third work, *L’Heure espagnole*, describing the “grotesque automatons” that animate the stage.<sup>11</sup>

I propose that the grotesque serves three functions in Ravel’s music: 1) it provides an aesthetic framework for interpreting, without reconciling, Ravel’s diverse musical styles; 2) it offers a new context for his long-standing appreciation of Poe;<sup>12</sup> and 3) it unveils transgressive elements within conventional musical structures, suggesting that Ravel’s innovations often manifest themselves by co-opting and subverting traditional practice.

## Unity and Disjunction

In the last ten years, a number of studies on the musical grotesque have emerged, with many focusing on twentieth-century music—and, more specifically, on composers whose music tends to elude systems, creeds, and contemporary analytical techniques. Esti Sheinberg, who examines contradictory strategies in the music of Shostakovich, notes the grotesque’s taxonomic and semiological relationship to irony, parody, and

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<sup>10</sup> This work was originally entitled *Sérénade*; Ravel added “grotesque” to the title in his autobiographical sketch communicated to Roland-Manuel and later printed in *La Revue musicale* 19, no. 187 (December 1938): 17-23. A reprint and translation appear in Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 29-33. The secondary literature traditionally includes “grotesque” in *Sérénade*’s title.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Tenroc, “Les Avant-Premières: ‘Thérèse’ et ‘L’Heure espagnole’ à l’Opéra-Comique,” *Comoedia* (11 May 1911): 3. Portions of this interview are reprinted and translated in Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 412.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Mawer has also recently suggested that Ravel’s lifelong interest in Poe “support[s] an overall aesthetic homogeneity in his music.” See Mawer, “Balanchine’s ‘La Valse’: Meanings and Implications for Ravel Studies,” *The Opera Quarterly* 22 (Winter 2006): 107.

incongruity.<sup>13</sup> Julie Brown seeks affinities between the grotesque, stylistic hybridity, and bodily transformation in Bartók's music, avoiding musical taxonomies in favor of interdependent aesthetic and cultural phenomena.<sup>14</sup> Both studies intersect at a methodological locus that characterizes the grotesque through wide-ranging commentaries, cutting across cultures, eras and aesthetic trends. Sheinberg's sources on the grotesque include Aristotle, Mikhail Bakhtin, Søren Kirkegaard, Friedrich Schlegel, and Kayser; Brown draws from discourses by Baudelaire, Jean Paul, Victor Hugo, Hegel, Kant, Hector Berlioz, and Edmund Burke.<sup>15</sup>

My approach to the grotesque differs because Ravel applied the term to his own music in ways that might seem incongruous, both to Aristotle and the modern reader. Linguistic and cultural difference motivates my decision to situate the grotesque within the cultural and aesthetic milieu of nineteenth-century France, when it flourished in literary and aesthetic discourses.<sup>16</sup> I characterize the French grotesque by examining Hugo's 1827 preface to *Cromwell*, Théophile Gautier's *Les Grotesques*, Baudelaire's essay, "De l'essence du rire," and Berlioz's *Les Grotesques*

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<sup>13</sup> See Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Julie Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Other sources use transhistorical characterizations of the grotesque to find its manifestation in otherwise unrelated musical works. See James Graeme Fullerton, "The Grotesque in Twentieth-Century Opera" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2006); Patricia Pinson, "The Shattered Frame: A Study of the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Music" (PhD diss., Ohio University, 1971); Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "The Musical Representation of the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 16 (Winter 2000): 34-51.

<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Le Guin takes a similar approach as she studies the relationship between aesthetics, performance, and the body in Boccherini's music, characterizing the grotesque through contemporary sources from Goya's art to eighteenth-century dance treatises. See Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 138-147.



*de la musique* before turning to the tales and criticism of Poe—a juncture where Ravel and the French grotesque meet. When I refer to modern scholarship on the grotesque, it is usually to explicate these contemporary sources.

In four works that exemplify the grotesque in Ravel's music—*Sérénade grotesque* (1893), *L'Heure espagnole* (1907-1909), *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909-1912), and *La Valse* (1919-1920)—I seek relationships between music, text, gesture, and reception history that suggest the grotesque's characteristic unity among disjunction. I avoid producing a catalogue of attributes, since the grotesque's inability to be classified according to discrete traits and types is emblematic of its presence. Because the grotesque only realizes its effect when it provokes a reaction from a viewer or listener, reception histories provide invaluable information about the ways in which contemporary audiences first interacted with these works.<sup>17</sup>

Disjunct, or contradictory, elements are often easy to identify in a work, but the characteristics of unity are more difficult to discern. A performance of John Cage's *Water Music* (1952), for example, features a variety of sounds—bird whistles, radios, piano playing, card shuffling, and pouring water—whose disjunct relationships renders them virtually independent musical voices, all talking at the same time but rarely talking to one another. An audience would probably respond to a performance of *Water Music* as it would to most of Cage's works from this period—with the confusion and disagreement that typically accompanies the grotesque. Yet *Water Music* lacks the distinctive merging of disjunctions, unhappily

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<sup>17</sup> Only *Sérénade grotesque* lacks a reception history; this student work remained unpublished until 1975.

wedded in a space that can scarcely accommodate them. Although the work challenges the audience's conception of sound and structure in music, it does not establish formal boundaries that integrate its disjunct sounds into an aurally perceptible schema.

The formal integrity of Ravel's music is rarely questioned: even critics acknowledge that Ravel articulates structural relationships with clarity and economy. Though he often evokes classical or baroque models, he also generates structure through repetitive and additive processes derived organically, whether through variation, phrase extension, or newly forged relationships between previously unrelated material. More important than Ravel's formal clarity, however, is the unity of effect described by Poe in "The Philosophy of Composition," and discussed here in Chapter IV. For the collision of contradictory materials to be perceived as grotesque, they must do more than share the same space; they must transcend their contradictory aspects, working together to communicate a single aesthetic effect.

If the grotesque is indeed a motivating aesthetic principle in Ravel's music, then the stylistic periodization of his career may merit revisiting. The implications of such a project may extend beyond Ravel studies to encompass *fin/début-de-siècle* aesthetics generally: the grotesque, for example, may function as an aesthetic cousin to the Baudelairean correspondences that lingered in Symbolist music and literature towards the end of the nineteenth century. Considering music's *fin-de-siècle* status as the type of all arts, Ravel's grotesque may present new witness to the possibilities and limitations of cross-disciplinary artistic influence.

## CHAPTER II

### ENVISIONING THE GROTESQUE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

For Ravel, the nineteenth century functioned as a paradoxical source of inspiration and estrangement. In 1875, the year he was born, France was nurturing a recent birth of its own: the Third Republic, conceived in the ruin of the Franco-Prussian War. Before Ravel's first birthday, the country elected Victor Hugo as a senator and marked, with little fanfare, the death of Georges Bizet.

Though Ravel's musical style epitomized modernity for contemporary French listeners, the composer's formative influences—Poe, Baudelaire, the early Symbolists—flourished in the nineteenth century, and some predated the Third Republic. Ravel's flirtations with antique and exotic styles have long been a part of his musical and biographical story, sometimes to his detriment; critics have regretted that Ravel would anchor his music so firmly in formal classical traditions. What has escaped most scholars—and what is, perhaps, most remarkable about Ravel—is not his reinterpretation of eighteenth-century forms and styles, but rather the way he transformed *nineteenth*-century sources into strikingly modern material through parody, subversion, and occasionally homage.

The entries for “grotesque” and “grotesquement” in *Trésor de la langue française*, a modern compendium of definitions and historical citations, includes twenty-four references illustrating the use of both terms in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary contexts. Of these references, twenty fall either squarely in the nineteenth century or within striking distance (1799, 1903, and 1904, in three cases). Among the writers cited are the Goncourt brothers, Huysmans, Gautier, Zola, Mallarmé, Balzac, Verlaine, and Baudelaire. Curiously, Victor Hugo is not among them, despite his having written the most influential discourse on the grotesque in nineteenth-century France—the 1827 preface to *Cromwell*. Hugo’s intellectual presence, however, may be witnessed in virtually every definition and citation. The same is true of the entry on the grotesque in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*: more contemporary with Ravel’s time (published from 1932-35), it provides no references to Hugo or any other author, but still gives a definition of the grotesque consistent with nineteenth-century characterizations.<sup>18</sup>

### **Polemics in Hugo’s Preface to *Cromwell***

Among the many hundreds of volumes in Ravel’s library preserved at the composer’s home in Montfort l’Amaury, there may still be a copy of Victor Hugo’s *Cromwell* sandwiched among multiple bound volumes of the writer’s collected works. Orenstein reports that Ravel’s library contained around 1,000 volumes and included many “rare, beautifully bound editions, among them the complete works of Balzac,

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<sup>18</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1932-35), s.v. “grotesque.”

Hugo, La Fontaine, Molière, Proust, Racine, and Voltaire.”<sup>19</sup> Hugo’s preface to *Cromwell*, written in a tone at times sarcastic, poetic, and playfully exaggerated, is almost as famous as his play was infamous. Noting in the preface that his already protracted drama had no need for additional heft, Hugo nevertheless used the space to expound upon a controversial aesthetic theory, in part to explicate the expressive style of his new play.

To introduce the grotesque, Hugo begins by considering the foundations of classical theater, among them epic drama, ideal beauty, and a preference for the material over the spiritual. According to Hugo, even the spiritual was corporeal for the pagan Greeks, whose gods ate and drank, bled when wounded, and hid themselves from mortals by taking cover behind the clouds. Christianity, which introduced the concept of body and soul, provided the basis for a modern aesthetic that challenged both the Greek ideals of beauty and the conflation of physical and spiritual phenomena. Modernity would thus advance “a principle unknown to the ancients, a new type introduced in poetry;....The new type is the grotesque; the new form is comedy.”<sup>20</sup>

Hugo preempts his critics by acknowledging that the grotesque is not a modern phenomenon, for both comedy and the grotesque were known even among the ancients. As a modern aesthetic, then, the grotesque is not an invention but rather

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<sup>19</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Victor Hugo, preface to *Cromwell*, trans. I.G. Burnham (Philadelphia: Rittenhouse, 1896), 26. “Voilà une forme nouvelle qui se développe dans l’art. Ce type, c’est le grotesque. Cette forme, c’est la comédie.” See *Préface de Cromwell*, vol. 5, bk. 1, *Oeuvres complètes de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Hetzel/Maison Quantin, n.d.), 9.

an accretion developed over centuries, its centrality to art only newly recognized. Newly recognized, perhaps, but not easily recognized, for Hugo's miscellany of descriptive, contrasting adjectives underscores the problem of characterizing the grotesque in any rigorous or meaningful way. The same variety that comprises the phenomenon simultaneously undermines its conceptual cohesion. For Hugo, the grotesque may encompass the hideous, the absurd, the burlesque, and parody in literature and the visual arts; its exponents include writers and artists spanning at least four centuries.<sup>21</sup> No definition of the grotesque may be found in Hugo's preface, although the examples he provides do share points of congruency.

Early on, Hugo sets out the precepts for a contemporary theater characterized by the "harmony of contraries": audiences exchange classical ideals of beauty for the sublime and the grotesque, which should appear side by side in the theater as they do in nature.

[The modern muse] will feel that everything in creation is not *beautiful* from the standpoint of mankind, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the misshapen beside the graceful, the grotesque beside the sublime, evil with good, darkness with light. It will ask itself if the restricted, relative reasoning of the artist ought to prevail over the infinite, absolute reasoning of the Creator;...if art has the right to cut in two, so to speak, man, life, creation; if, in short, harmony is best secured by incompleteness.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hugo evokes more contemporary examples of the grotesque by referring to characters from *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Beaumarchais's 1784 play.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25. "Elle sentira que tout dans la création n'est pas humainement *beau*, que le laid y existe à côté du beau, le difforme près du gracieux, le grotesque au revers du sublime, le mal avec le bien, l'ombre avec la lumière. Elle se demandera si la raison étroite et relative de l'artiste doit avoir gain de cause sur la raison infinie, absolue, du créateur; si c'est à l'homme à rectifier Dieu; si une nature mutilée en sera plus belle; si l'art a le droit de dédoubler, pour ainsi dire, l'homme, la vie, la création; si chaque chose marchera mieux quand on lui aura ôté son muscle et son ressort; si, enfin, c'est le moyen d'être harmonieux que d'être incomplet." See *Préface de Cromwell*, 8-9.

“Complete” theater, by manifesting a greater likeness to nature, would “mingle in its creations, but without confounding them, light and darkness, the sublime and the ridiculous, in other words, the body and the soul, the animal and the intellectual....”<sup>23</sup> While ancient theater separated comedy from tragedy, the modern school should recognize and reflect nature’s infinite variety. Similarly, modern artists would acknowledge humanity’s dichotomous nature, its body and soul, fusing the material with the spiritual. By casting the grotesque in “the part of the human animal”<sup>24</sup> to contrast with the purified Christian soul, Hugo creates a motley pair— Caliban to the celestial Ariel.<sup>25</sup> When characterizing the grotesque as a debased figure relative to its carnal analogue, the “human animal,” he suggests its affinity with the “deformed and the horrible,”<sup>26</sup> contrasting with the beauty and light of sublimity.

Hugo’s bifurcation of the grotesque and the sublime may seem more like contraposition, with the grotesque comparing unfavorably to its ethereal cousin. Certainly his statement that “licentiousness, sycophancy, gluttony, avarice, perfidy, and hypocrisy” are among the vices of the grotesque reads like a criminal indictment. Yet Hugo is careful to note that while the grotesque may be “impregnated with terror,” as it manifests in the characters of Richard III or Mephistopheles, it may also

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 26. “Elle se mettra à faire comme la nature, à mêler dans ses créations, sans pourtant les confondre, l’ombre à la lumière, le grotesque au sublime, en d’autres termes, le corps à l’âme, la bête à l’esprit;...” See *Préface de Cromwell*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 35. “En effet, dans la poésie nouvelle, tandis que le sublime représentera l’âme telle qu’elle est, épurée par la morale chrétienne, lui jouera le rôle de la bête humaine.” See *Préface de Cromwell*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Hugo himself evokes this comparison; see preface to *Cromwell*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 29.

appear “with a veil of charm and refinement” reflected in characters like Figaro, Don Juan, or Mercutio.<sup>27</sup> Beyond its ability to disguise itself, the grotesque emerges in a variety of artistic styles and genres, revealing its complex, multifarious nature:

It is this same grotesque type, which now casts into the Christian hell those hideous forms which the severe genius of Dante and of Milton will evoke, and again peoples it with the absurd figures, among which Callot, the burlesque Michel-Angelo, will sport. If from the ideal it passes to the real world, it there unfolds an inexhaustible supply of parodies of human foibles.<sup>28</sup>

Just as Hugo establishes a dichotomy between the grotesque and the sublime, he also notes the dual nature of the grotesque itself, which “on the one hand...creates the deformed and the horrible; on the other hand, the comic, the buffoon.”<sup>29</sup> Like *l’homme double*, whose duality is reflected in the union of mortal body and immortal soul,<sup>30</sup> the grotesque manifests both serious and comic attributes—different faces of a single coin.<sup>31</sup> Of particular interest is Hugo’s reference to Jacques Callot, the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 30. “C’est lui, toujours lui, qui tantôt jette dans l’enfer chrétien ces hideuses figures qu’évoquera l’âpre génie de Dante et de Milton, tantôt le peuple de ces formes ridicules au milieu desquelles se jouera Callot, le Michel-Ange burlesque. Si du monde idéal il passe au monde réel, il y déroule d’interminables parodies de l’humanité.” See *Préface de Cromwell*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 29. “Il y est partout; d’une part, il crée le difforme et l’horrible; de l’autre, le comique et le bouffon.” See *Préface de Cromwell*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Vanessa M. Merhi, “Distortion as Identity from the Grotesque to *L’Humour Noir*: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Jarry” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2006), 3.

<sup>31</sup> This fusion of opposites features prominently in many studies on the grotesque, including an influential work by John Ruskin. See “Grotesque Renaissance,” 113-165.



seventeenth-century engraver, a figure frequently invoked in nineteenth-century discourses on the grotesque.<sup>32</sup>

Vanessa Merhi notes that Hugo's grotesque changes over the course of his career, abandoning the binary oppositions of body and soul, grotesque and sublime, in favor of a view that humanity is "une et multiple."<sup>33</sup> In Hugo's 1859 poem "Le Satyre,"<sup>34</sup> published thirty years after the *Cromwell* preface, the Greek hero Hercules transports a faun to the heavens, where the gods mock the creature's deformity and deem his presence a threat to celestial order. As the faun sings a hymn praising the trappings of mortal life, he enjoins man to cast off his "pieds de faune." At the same time, he initiates his own transformation, growing into a world in which his physical distortions "have become features in an immense landscape, a literal translation of Hugo's acknowledgment in the preface to *Cromwell* of the important role that the grotesque plays in nature."<sup>35</sup> In assuming his rightful place among the gods—as Pan—the satyr personifies a grotesque that subsumes the sublime, rather than engaging it through oppositional contrast.

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<sup>32</sup> Hugo strays from the grotesque in portions of the preface, examining the relationship between art and nature, reality and artifice, poetry and prose; he concludes with a discussion of the figure of Cromwell himself, along with his own adaptation of events and characters for the stage. By the end of the preface, we finally learn the practical purpose behind his discourse: to justify the character of a stage play that is neither comedy nor tragedy, but rather a hybrid that would "blend these two species of pleasure." See Hugo, preface to *Cromwell*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Merhi, "Distortion as Identity," 43.

<sup>34</sup> The poem comes from "La Légende des siècles," a collection of epic poetry published in three installments that chronicles the history and variety of human experience.

<sup>35</sup> Merhi, "Distortion as Identity," 49.

## The Grotesque as Literary Criticism: Théophile Gautier

Gautier's *Les Grotesques*, a collection of essays originally published in 1834-35, is more a work of literary criticism than an aesthetic discourse. Rather than heaping further aggrandizement on a crowded field of classical authors, Gautier focuses on lesser-known "second-rate poets." He justifies his interest in such a project by claiming that "pearls are scarcely found elsewhere than in a dunghill"—where else, he claims, would one look? While Gautier celebrates the glimmers that emerge from this undiscovered country, he also takes a curious interest in the middling and meretricious, describing poetic defects with an enthusiasm that fuels paragraphs and even pages.

In an essay on the works of Paul Scarron, Gautier acknowledges Hugo's role in the aesthetic ancestry of the grotesque in France: "We shall not, because we happen to be speaking of Scarron, re-state here the thesis of the grotesque so eloquently maintained in a famous preface."<sup>36</sup> Hugo's interest in supplanting classical tradition with a modern aesthetic partially motivated by the grotesque is not shared by Gautier, who recognizes the latent defect in such a program: if "legitimacy is conferred by tradition," then the subversive novelty of the grotesque is incompatible with an aesthetics derived from the sanctions of legacy.<sup>37</sup> Gautier's

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<sup>36</sup> Théophile Gautier, *The Grotesques*, vol. 2, *The Complete Works of Théophile Gautier*, trans. and ed. F.C. DeSumichrast (London and New York: Postlethwaite, Taylor & Knowles, 1909), 292. "Nous ne reviendrons pas faire ici, à propos de Scarron, la théorie du grotesque, si éloquemment exposée dans une préface célèbre." See *Les Grotesques* (Paris: Charpentier, 1882), 354.

<sup>37</sup> Elisheva Rosen, "Innovation and its Reception: The Grotesque in Aesthetic Thought," *SubStance* 19 (1990): 131.

debt to Hugo nevertheless emerges when he notes the photonegative effect of the grotesque, which spotlights beauty by darkening the shadows around it:

The burlesque, or, if you prefer it, the grotesque, has always existed both in art and nature, as a contrast and a set-off. The world is full of animals the nature and existence of which are inexplicable save by the law of opposition; their ugliness evidently serves to bring out the beauty of the higher and nobler beings. But for the demon, the angel would not be as splendid as he is, and the toad makes the beauty of the humming-bird more remarkable and striking.<sup>38</sup>

Although Gautier does not evoke Hugo's grotesque/sublime dichotomy, he aligns himself with Hugo by casting the grotesque on one side of an inverted mirror that reflects, through its own darkness and distortion, greater light on the beautiful and transcendent. Hugo argues that "drama is the grotesque within the sublime, the soul within the body, the tragedy beneath the comedy."<sup>39</sup> Gautier likewise asserts that comedy and tragedy are folded into each other, existing as symbiotic rather than autonomous phenomena: "The most touching situation has its comical side, and laughter often breaks out through tears. Any art, therefore, which seeks to be true, is bound to admit both sides. Tragedy and comedy are too arbitrary in their exclusiveness; no action can be wholly terrifying or wholly amusing."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 293. "Le burlesque, ou, si vous aimez mieux, le grotesque, a toujours existé, dans l'art et dans la nature, à l'état de repoussoir et de contraste. La création fourmille d'animaux dont on ne peut s'expliquer l'existence et la nécessité que par la loi des oppositions. Leur laideur sert évidemment à faire ressortir la beauté d'êtres mieux doués et plus nobles; sans le démon, l'ange n'aurait pas sa valeur; le crapaud rend plus sensible et plus frappante la grâce du colibri." *Les Grotesques*, 353.

<sup>39</sup> Hugo, preface to *Cromwell*, 108.

<sup>40</sup> Gautier, *The Grotesques*, 293. "La scène la plus touchante a son côté comique, et le rire s'épanouit souvent à travers les pleurs. Un art qui voudrait être vrai devrait donc admettre l'une et l'autre face. La tragédie et la comédie sont trop absolues dans leur exclusions. Aucune action n'est d'un bout à

Like Hugo, Gautier narrates in brief the development of the grotesque, though he takes linguistics (rather than aesthetics) as his starting point, describing the etymology of “grotesque” before linking it to the fanciful, capricious designs found in excavated Roman architecture.<sup>41</sup> In a discussion of the arts in King Louis XIV’s court, Gautier’s remarks on literary style reveal a conceptual transfer from visual to verbal caprice:

The language was charming; full of colour, simple, strong, heroic, fantastic, elegant, grotesque, lending itself to every fancy of the writer, and as well fitted to express the haughty Castilian manners of the Cid as to blacken the walls of pothouses with spicy refrains of gluttony.<sup>42</sup>

This list of adjectives, which treats the grotesque as one of many diverse qualities, evokes the transgression of boundaries attributed to the phenomenon by later nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators, including Ruskin and Kayser. In this case, the boundaries involve distinctions of class and culture—the sort that separate the imperious soldier from the denizens of the local tavern.

Unlike Hugo, who summoned a cavalcade of literary characters and historical figures to illuminate the grotesque, Gautier makes his point by returning repeatedly to

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l’autre effrayante ou risible; il y a des choses fort comiques dans les événements les plus sérieux, et des choses fort tristes dans les plus bouffonnes aventures.” See *Les Grotesques*, 353.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 286. “L’étymologie de grotesque est *grutta*, nom qu’on donnait aux chambres antiques mises à jour par les fouilles, et dont les murailles étaient couvertes d’animaux terminés par des feuillages, de chimères ailées, de génies sortant de la coupe des fleurs, de palais d’architecture bizarre, et de mille autres caprices et fantaisies.” See *Les Grotesques*, 350.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 271. The English translation duplicates the French grammar but leaves out one of its adjectives (“free”): “C’était une langue charmante, colorée, naïve, forte, libre, héroïque, fantasque, élégante, grotesque, se prêtant à tous les besoins, à tous les caprices de l’écrivain, aussi propre à rendre les allures hautaines et castillanes du Cid qu’à charbonner les murs des cabarets de chauds refrains de goinfre.” See *Les Grotesques*, 338. I amended DeSumichrast’s translation slightly.

the artistic style of Callot. In a paragraph discussing the fifteenth-century poet François Villon, Gautier considers the grotesque a stylistic designation that aptly characterizes Callot's work:

Next to a page wet with tears comes a chaplet of absurdities and conundrums as wretched as the puns of the English nobleman; the effect produced by a suave painting is destroyed by a grotesque sketch in Callot's manner. One description leads to another. The ironical bequests follow each other uninterruptedly.<sup>43</sup>

Though it may seem here that Gautier's grotesque is like a stew of eclectic, incompatible ingredients, it still bears a strong resemblance to Hugo's, in which the grotesque functions largely as a vehicle for contrast. Gautier also links the grotesque with Callot in a lengthy, sardonic description of a typical writer in Scudéry and Corneille's seventeenth century,

...his chest well thrown out as in Callot's grotesques, one foot planted forward, one hand on his hip, head thrown back, his absurdly long rapier adorned with a no less absurdly large shell, his extravagant and huge plume, his titanic moustache which pierces the heavens with its two sharp points; and when, following Scudéry's example, he mingles literary pretensions with every one of his boasts, you laugh until you nearly split your sides.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 29. "...; à côté d'une page toute moite de pleurs vous trouvez un chapelet de coq-à-l'âne et de rébus aussi détestables que les calembours du pair anglais. L'effet d'une peinture suave est détruit par une esquisse grotesque à la manière de Callot; une digression mène à une autre, les legs ironiques se succèdent sans interruption;..." See *Les Grotesques*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 220. "Le fanfaron n'est pas moins amusant avec sa tournure cambrée comme les grotesques de Callot, le pied en avant, la main sur la hanche, la tête renversée en arrière, son incommensurable rapière ornée d'une non moins incommensurable coquille, son panache excessif et prodigieux, sa moustache titanique et éventrant le ciel de ses deux crocs pointus. — Et lorsque, à l'exemple de Scudéry, il mêle des prétentions littéraires à toute bravacherie, il faut indispensablement se faire cercler les côtes pour ne pas éclater de rire." See *Les Grotesques*, 299.

Gautier relies on visual cues like gesture, dress, and manner to create an image reminiscent of any number of Callot's theater works—which will be discussed below—but especially the figure of the Capitano, a “swaggering, blustering, arrogant coward, full of bombast, threat, and vanity....”<sup>45</sup> The Callot reference is notable for another reason: not only does it highlight the comic aspect of the grotesque, but it also links the onlooker's response (laughter) with an uncomfortable physical sensation (splitting one's sides, or laughing until it hurts). By locating the grotesque in the response of the viewer, Gautier forges a link to his younger contemporary, Baudelaire.

### **Baudelaire's Dualism: “De l'essence du rire”**

As an erstwhile admirer of Hugo and Gautier, Charles Baudelaire enjoyed the approbation of both—Hugo the elder statesman of French literature, Gautier the flamboyant critic, Salon jurist, and proponent of “art for art's sake.” The degree to which Baudelaire allied himself with Gautier (or at least pretended to) may be seen in the preface of his *Les Fleurs du mal*, with its lavish dedication: “To the impeccable poet, to the perfect magician of French letters, to my very dear and revered master and friend Théophile Gautier, with feelings of deepest humility, I dedicate these sickly flowers.”<sup>46</sup> Baudelaire's essay, “De l'essence du rire,” first published in *Le*

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<sup>45</sup> Gerald Kahan, *Jacques Callot: Artist of the Theatre* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1959), dedicatory page.

*Portefeuille* in 1855,<sup>47</sup> provides a mid-century perspective on the grotesque that assimilates and extends many of the ideas developed by his predecessors.

In the work's first paragraph, Baudelaire aligns himself with Gautier's *l'art pour l'art* by identifying two types of caricatures: those that function as cultural or philosophical commentaries, and those that "contain a mysterious, lasting, eternal element, which recommends them to the attention of artists."<sup>48</sup> Beauty may transcend time, culture, and function, but so too may laughter—the natural response to caricature and the "true subject" of Baudelaire's discourse. For Baudelaire, the origins of laughter may be traced to original sin: "Human laughter is intimately linked with the accident of an ancient Fall, of a debasement both physical and moral."<sup>49</sup> Just as sorrow did not exist in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, laughter was a similarly alien phenomenon; as products of mortality and careworn experience, neither belonged in a paradise inhabited by innocents. God likewise does not laugh, for his perfection, omnipotence, and immateriality exempt him from the common mortal experience that makes human laughter possible: if laughter is "satanic," it is also "profoundly human."<sup>50</sup> Humanity, which occupies a tenuous position in the celestial hierarchy, falls well short of divinity but nevertheless maintains a spiritual and

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<sup>47</sup> The essay may have been part of a larger work on caricature, perhaps conceived as early as 1845. When it was reprinted in 1857 in *Le Présent*, it was followed by related articles on caricaturists (French and foreign) in subsequent issues. See Jonathan Mayne, trans. and ed., *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), xix.

<sup>48</sup> Baudelaire, "Essence of Laughter," in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 147.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 149. "Le rire humain est intimement lié à l'accident d'une chute ancienne, d'une dégradation physique et morale." See "De l'essence du rire" in *Oeuvres complètes (Baudelaire)*, vol. 2, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 527-28.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 153.

intellectual edge over the animal world; laughter is thus a “contradictory” phenomenon, at once “a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery.”<sup>51</sup>

Baudelaire extends the duality of laughter beyond specimens of abstract humanity to include the reader, to whom his clever turns of phrase and ironic prevarications are directed. After referring to the “physiologists of laughter” who bolster his description of laughing as a “satanic” impulse that arises from a state of superiority, Baudelaire then inverts the critique: “I should not be surprised if, on making this discovery, the physiologist had burst out laughing himself at the thought of his own superiority. Therefore he should have said: Laughter comes from the idea of one’s *own* superiority.”<sup>52</sup> Just as the dual nature of humanity reflects inherent contradiction, so too does this critique provoke an equivocal, contradictory brand of laughter. Baudelaire’s criticism of the physiologists’ statement on superiority ironically causes us to feel superior to them and laugh. At the same time, however, we are uncomfortably aware that the “self-delusion” of superiority exhibited by the physiologists could just as easily apply to us; only the “ironic awareness of our simultaneous superiority and inferiority” may free us from the paradoxical comic bind.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 154. “Il est dans l’homme la conséquence de l’idée de sa propre supériorité; et, en effet, comme le rire est essentiellement humain, il est essentiellement contradictoire, c’est-à-dire qu’il est à la fois signe d’une grandeur infinie et d’une misère infinie, misère infinie relativement à l’Être absolu dont il possède la conception, grandeur infinie relativement aux animaux.” See “Essence du rire,” 532.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 152. “Je ne serais pas étonné que devant cette découverte le physiologiste se fût mis à rire en pensant à sa propre supériorité. Aussi, il fallait dire: Le rire vient de l’idée de sa propre supériorité.” See “Essence du rire,” 530.

<sup>53</sup> Michele Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature: From the Comic to an Art of Modernity* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 10.



If Hugo's dichotomy between the human animal and the purified soul peers out from behind Baudelaire's dualisms, then Baudelaire acknowledges this influence tacitly, if not directly, in turning to the grotesque. He differentiates two types of comedy, the "absolute comic" (*le comique absolu*) and the "significative comic," noting that the former results in a special kind of laughter whose source cannot be traced to superior position:

But there is one case [varieties of laughter] where the question is more complicated. It is the laughter of man—but a true and violent laughter—at the sight of an object which is neither a sign of weakness nor of disaster among his fellows. It is easy to guess that I am referring to the laughter caused by the grotesque. Fabulous creations, beings whose authority and *raison d'être* cannot be drawn from the code of common sense, often provoke in us an insane and excessive mirth, which expresses itself in interminable paroxysms and swoons.<sup>54</sup>

Baudelaire's grotesque bears a strong resemblance to the fanciful ornaments and arabesques that first inspired the term—phenomena that cannot be categorized, explained, or governed by daily experience. Like Gautier, Baudelaire links his grotesque to comedy and locates it not in the chimerical creations themselves but in the viewer's response to them. The phrase "insane and excessive mirth" recalls Gautier's description of the appropriate response to a braggart poet: "laugh[ing] until

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<sup>54</sup> Baudelaire, "Essence of Laughter," 156. "Il y a un cas où la question est plus compliquée. C'est le rire de l'homme, mais rire vrai, rire violent, à l'aspect d'objets qui ne sont pas un signe de faiblesse ou de malheur chez ses semblables. Il est facile de deviner que je veux parler du rire causé par le grotesque. Les créations fabuleuses, les êtres dont la raison, la légitimation ne peut pas être tirée du code du sens commun, excitent souvent en nous une hilarité folle, excessive, et qui se traduit en des déchirements et des pâmoisons interminables." See "Essence du rire," 535.

you nearly split your sides.”<sup>55</sup>

Each of these examples combines the pleasure of laughter with something exaggerated, disproportionate, or painful, indicating that the grotesque’s transgression of boundaries is not limited to the object itself: the viewer may experience contrasting, even contradictory emotions that evade categorization. Yet contrast alone is not enough to admit an object or emotional response to the ranks of the grotesque. Baudelaire notes that the integrity of the phenomenon in question must remain intact, for the grotesque “emerges as a *unity* which calls for the intuition to grasp it.”<sup>56</sup> The grotesque is sensed without being understood, its inherent contradictions recognized but not resolved.

In attempting to define the grotesque, Baudelaire produces a sweeping principle that seems even more capacious than Hugo’s: “There is but one criterion of the grotesque, and that is laughter—immediate laughter.”<sup>57</sup> Yet among his many examples of the grotesque there are limiting commonalities that reveal much greater specificity and detail than this single statement may suggest.<sup>58</sup>

The works of E.T.A. Hoffmann figure prominently in “De l’essence du

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<sup>55</sup> In Hugo’s *L’Homme qui rit*, the character Gwynplaine’s facial disfigurement results in an exaggerated smile—a “masque *bouffon et terrible*”—that similarly reflects laughter’s painful distortions, which may turn the spectator into a spectacle. See Merhi, “Distortion as Identity,” 3, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 157. The emphasis is Baudelaire’s.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 157. “Il n’y a qu’une vérification du grotesque, c’est le rire, et le rire subit;...” See “Essence du rire,” 536.

<sup>58</sup> Seeking more specific boundaries for Baudelaire’s grotesque may seem to violate the very nature of the grotesque itself, which exists in the merging of distinct phenomena. Nevertheless, Baudelaire provides some of these boundaries himself. Perhaps it is enough to recognize this contradiction without attempting to resolve it.

rire.”<sup>59</sup>

In Hoffmann’s “The King’s Betrothed” (*Die Königsbraut*), Baudelaire describes a girl watching in awe as the carrot army parades by her home, arrayed “with enormous green plumes on their heads, like carriage-footmen, going through a series of marvelous tricks and capers on their little horses!”<sup>60</sup> The girl’s father, a skilled sorcerer, recognizes that the parade is merely bewitchment, an “apparatus of seduction.” Determined to reveal the cruder side of vegetable life, he shows his daughter a dream of the carrots asleep in their barracks, a “mass of red and green soldiery in its appalling undress, wallowing and snoring in the filthy midden from which it first emerged.”<sup>61</sup>

In tandem with its conventional fairy-tale premise, “The King’s Betrothed” introduces several incongruities that evoke the grotesque. Young ladies in fairy tales often fall for birds or frogs whom they later discover to be transfigured princes, but few find romance with a vegetable. The carrot army has a dual nature, proudly swaggering in rank and file during daylight while snoozing in haphazard squalor at night. The carrots are not transformed at any point in the story; rather, their duality is contained within their unchanging vegetable identity. It is the perception of the girl that changes rather than the carrots themselves.

“The Princess Brambilla” (*Die Prinzessin Brambilla*), which Baudelaire

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<sup>59</sup> Baudelaire invites anyone who wants to understand the grotesque to read Hoffmann’s “The King’s Betrothed,” “Peregrinus Tyss,” “The Golden Pot,” and especially “The Princess Brambilla.”

<sup>60</sup> Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 163.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

considers a “catechism of high aesthetics,” features an actor named Giglio Fava who experiences a “chronic dualism.” Baudelaire takes care to emphasize that Fava is, in fact, one person despite his mutable nature: “This *single* character changes personality from time to time.”<sup>62</sup> In love with the Princess Brambilla, who is engaged to the Assyrian prince, Giglio imagines himself to be the prince one day, dressed up in the appropriate costume. When he encounters the actual prince, arrayed in garb identical to his, he derides this rival suitor for trying to woo the Princess from him, imagining the prince to be himself in disguise.

Embedded in Baudelaire’s description of the tale is a paradox of identity that underscores the unity/duality dichotomy of the grotesque. Giglio’s identities exist simultaneously, for his imagination projects his identity onto the prince even as his real self takes on the prince’s persona in his own mind. Despite the fact that Giglio’s identities are inventions, they interact with his true self as romantic rivals and political antagonists, muddying the distinction between fantasy and reality.

The most substantial example of Baudelaire’s grotesque appears in his recounting of an English pantomime, which featured *commedia dell’arte* characters performing for a French audience.<sup>63</sup> The character of Pierrot, Baudelaire notes, was a spry and animated figure rather than the sallow, pale one to which audiences were

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 164. Baudelaire’s emphasis on oneness is also apparent in the French: “Ce personnage *un* change de temps en temps de personnalité...” See “Essence du rire,” 542.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Mayne believes that the production was called “Arlequin, pantomime anglaise en 3 actes et 11 tableaux,” which would have been performed in 1842 at the Théâtre des Variétés. Mayne also points out that Gautier’s review of the performance, published 14 August 1842 in *La Presse*, largely agrees with Baudelaire’s account. See Mayne, *Painter of Modern Life*, 160.

accustomed, who entered the stage “like a hurricane,” pursuing “every kind of greedy and rapacious whim.”<sup>64</sup> The woman who fended off Pierrot’s raffish advances was played by “a very long, very thin man, whose outraged modesty emitted shrill screams.”<sup>65</sup> Pierrot faced the guillotine for some unnamed crime, allowing the audience to enjoy the spectacle of an onstage beheading. As his head rolled across the stage, revealing the “bleeding disk of the neck, the split vertebrae and all the details of a piece of butcher’s meat,”<sup>66</sup> Pierrot’s trunk picked up the lopped-off head and dropped it in his pocket.

Baudelaire acknowledges that on paper, the scene seems “pale and chilly.” It is the actors’ “special talent for hyperbole,” however, that makes possible these “monstrous buffooneries” (*monstrueuses farces*)—invoking Gautier’s assertion that “no action can be wholly terrifying or wholly amusing.” In summing up the performance and the audience’s reaction to it, Baudelaire notes that both were gripped by “le vertige de l’hyperbole.”<sup>67</sup> As the audience watches the prologue, he writes, “Suddenly *vertige* appears, *vertige* circulates in the air, we breathe *vertige*; it is *vertige* that fills our lungs and renews the blood in our arteries.”<sup>68</sup> In the nineteenth century, “vertige” could refer to an ailment provoked by loss of equilibrium or a

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<sup>64</sup> Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 160.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> In this case Maynes’s English translation, which renders “le vertige de l’hyperbole” as “the dizzy height of hyperbole,” does not quite capture Baudelaire’s full meaning.

<sup>68</sup> English translation mine. “Aussitôt le vertige est entré, le vertige circule dans l’air; on respire le vertige; c’est le vertige qui remplit les poumons et renouvelle le sang dans le ventricule.” See “Essence du rire,” 540.

pleasurable state of disorientation.<sup>69</sup> Baudelaire's use of the term to describe aspects of both performance and reception is notable, providing additional support for his conception of the grotesque as a union of dualities: comedy and horror, celestial and bestial, familiar and alien.

As two examples of the French grotesque, Baudelaire cites certain of Molière's plays and "the carnivalesque figures of Callot." Wolfgang Kayser notes that Callot's name was associated with the grotesque long before the nineteenth century, appearing in a dictionary as early as 1620, during the artist's own lifetime (1592-1635).<sup>70</sup> In the early eighteenth century, the *Dictionnaire universel* (1727) noted that the Lorraine engraver "avait un merveilleux génie pour dessiner des *grotesques*."<sup>71</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, Callot's work remained a paragon of grotesquerie for French and German writers, including Edmond de Goncourt and E.T.A. Hoffmann.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Hugo's metaphorical use of the term in his *Les chansons des rues et des bois* (1865) seemed to suggest several of these meanings, linking a dizzying acrophobia with the seductive charm of love's precariousness: "L'amour, où glissent les âmes/ Est un précipice; on a/ Le vertige au bord des femmes/Comme au penchant de l'Etna." See Paul Imbs, *Trésor de la langue française: dictionnaire de la langue du XIX<sup>e</sup> et du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, 1789-1960* (Paris: Éditions du centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1971), s.v. "vertige."

<sup>70</sup> Kayser, *The Grottesque*, 27. The Callot passage to which Kayser refers is from Monet's *Abrégé du parallèle* (1620). On the etymology of the grotesque in seventeenth-century France, see Charles-Louis Livet, *Lexique de la langue Molière* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1895-97), s.v. "grotesque."

<sup>71</sup> Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (La Haye: Pierre Husson, 1727), s.v. "grotesque." Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

<sup>72</sup> See one of Goncourt's Callot references in Imbs, *Trésor de la langue française*, s.v. "grotesque." Hoffmann evoked Callot in the title of his *Contes fantastiques: fantaisies à la manière de Callot*, describing Callot's influence in the introduction. See *Contes fantastiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 22.

### Quintessential Grotesques: The Art of Callot

An etcher and engraver, Jacques Callot spent the first part of his professional career working in Florence for the Medici family before returning to his birthplace of Nancy, where his patrons included the Duke of Lorraine and King Louis XIII. Callot's reputation as a meticulous technician and innovator was secured in a 1645 treatise on printmaking that made frequent reference to his art.<sup>73</sup> Best known for his portrayals of actors and theatrical productions, Callot most likely knew the work of various *commedia dell'arte* troupes,<sup>74</sup> though he freely interposed his own fanciful interpretations of contemporary costumes and productions. His oeuvre reveals a breadth and variety of subjects: landscapes, religious scenes, actors, dwarves, battles and military regalia, allegories, and mythological tales. This very diversity of motifs complicates attempts to characterize Callot's grotesque as nineteenth-century French writers might have understood it.

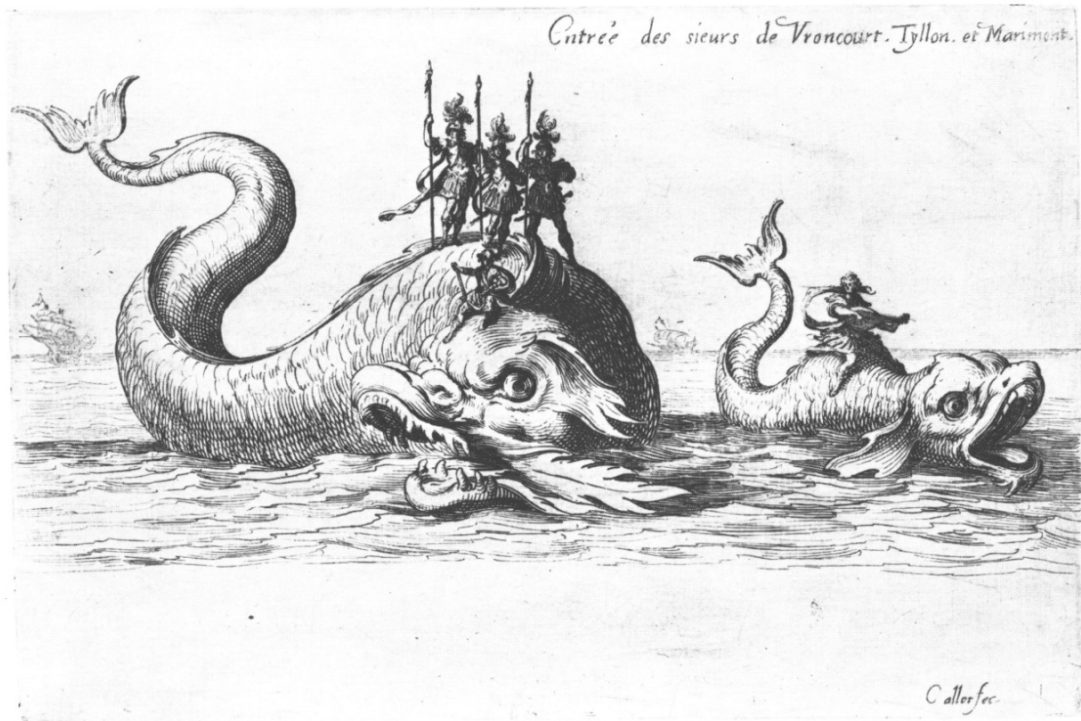
Sometimes writers evoke the artist comparatively: consider Gautier's description of Saint-Amant's grotesques—"clean and sharp after the fashion of Callot"—or Hugo's sobriquet for Callot, the "burlesque Michel-Angelo." Baudelaire's only reference to the artist emphasizes comedy over horror. Considering examples of Callot's work may explicate French perceptions of the grotesque, while at the same time exploring themes not explicitly considered grotesque by Hugo, Gautier, or Baudelaire.

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<sup>73</sup> H. Diane Russell, *Jacques Callot: Prints and Related Drawings* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1975), xxi.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Callot's etching, *Entrée des sieurs de Vroncourt, Tyllon, et Marimont*, derives from a series of processional scenes (see Plate 2.1). Instead of riding in a carriage or on a horse, the three gentlemen make their entrance in significantly grander style—on the back of a large sea monster accompanied by its offspring, which carries a lutenist. The men are elaborately attired and stand confidently, as though unaware that the monster could toss them into the sea or devour them at a moment's notice. Contrasting with the apparent diffidence of the men is the expression of the monster, whose mouth gapes open to reveal a clutch of fangs. The creature's curled lip and widened eye, which stares directly at the viewer, communicate a latent malice.



**Plate 2.1.** Jacques Callot, *Entrée des sieurs de Vroncourt, Tyllon et Marimont*. Etching, as reproduced in Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, figure 48.



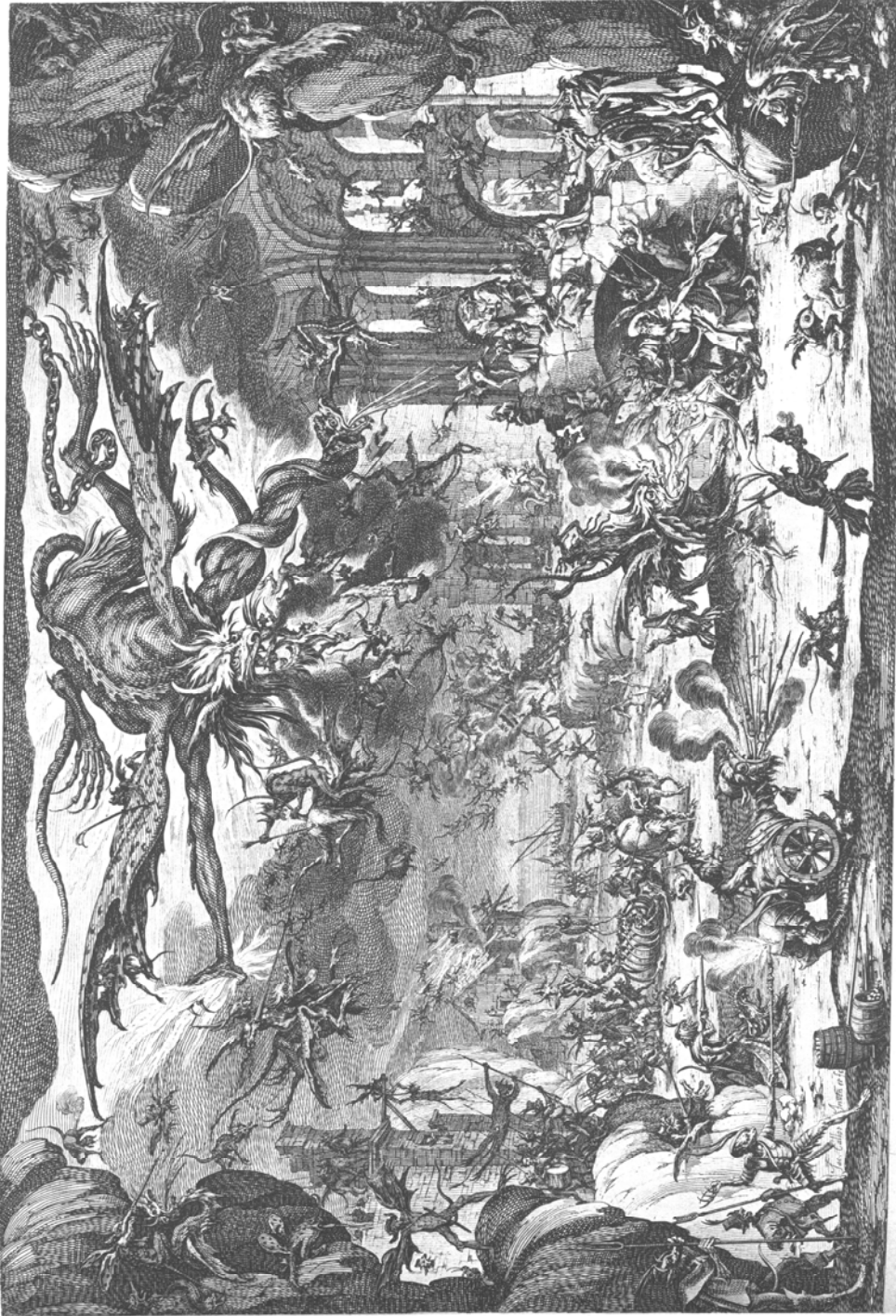
What is the viewer to make of such an image? Does Callot intend for us to laugh at the absurdity of the gentlemen's grand entrance, or to fear for their safety? Are we to take pleasure in his fanciful portrayal of the monster, who travels with its little child in tow? Or perhaps our attention may be drawn to the monstrous offspring, whose gaping, fang-lined mouth disconcertingly resembles that of its parent?

If the sea monster in *Entrée des sieurs* is the fantastical stuff of dreams, the banquet of chimerical creatures in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (second version) should more properly inspire nightmares. Callot's etching, shown in Plate 2.2, abounds with winged demons, fire-breathing dragons, and creatures wielding weapons. In the lower right foreground is the figure of St. Anthony holding aloft a cross as demons grasp at his robes (detail, Plate 2.3). A "carcass parade" unfolds in the middleground, where the nude figure of Circe, brandishing her talisman of vanity (a mirror), sits atop an animal skeleton.<sup>75</sup> Anal imagery and bodily functions appear prominently in the work; in the foreground, a spear and a musical instrument probe the backsides of a demon and an animal, respectively, while on the far left side, one demon defecates into the mouth of another.<sup>76</sup> Mobbed as it is with demon din, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* leaves an impression of horror, fantasy, and most of all, confusion.

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<sup>75</sup> Russell, *Jacques Callot*, 159.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 159-60. An earlier version of the print featured imagery associated with the dance of death, including a ring of demons and skeletons clutching hands, some carrying musical instruments.



**Plate 2.2.** *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (second version). Etching, as reproduced in Russell, *Jacques Callot*, figure 139.



**Plate 2.3. Detail, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (second version).  
Etching, as reproduced in Russell, *Jacques Callot*, figure 139.**

Taken together, these Callot works offer much that is congruent with characterizations of the grotesque by French writers. From Hugo's perspective, the image of the sea monster might be said to communicate that blending of sublime and grotesque to which modern art should aspire: the sublimity of dauntless humanity contrasting with the predatory instincts of the beast. *The Temptation of St. Anthony* almost seems like a pictorial illustration of Hugo's grotesque/sublime dichotomy, though the grotesque certainly seems to carry the day. For Gautier, both the fanciful

sea monster and the hideous demons clinging to St. Anthony might occupy the same genus of creation associated with the origins of the grotesque itself—namely the Roman ruins in which excavators found hybrid animal-plant figures, arabesques, and other images of “caprice and fancy.” Baudelaire, who similarly links his grotesque to “fabulous creations,” perhaps would have found *The Temptation of St. Anthony* grotesque for its duality of character, with its frightful figures and semi-comical anal imagery eliciting competing reactions from the viewer.<sup>77</sup> Much like Baudelaire’s description of the pantomime, *Temptation* is both uncomfortable to view and fascinating to dissect—maybe even capable of stimulating in the viewer the disorienting and irresistible “vertige.”

Art historians have identified many aspects of *Temptation* that evoke contemporary theatrical productions, parody court practices, and evince moral commentaries.<sup>78</sup> The figure of Circe, for example, is said to refer to, and perhaps criticize, Florentine parades featuring allegorical characters; the *danse macabre* may function as a *memento mori* intended to “point out the transitory pleasures of this world” and warn against material extravagance.<sup>79</sup> Yet Callot’s work, like those

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<sup>77</sup> Baudelaire’s own art criticism seems to support such a reading. In one of his two essays on caricature, “Quelques caricaturistes étrangers,” Baudelaire considers a bull-fighting scene from Goya’s *Dibersión de España*: “The formidable beast has lifted [a man’s] torn shirt with its horns, thus exposing his buttocks to view; and now, once again, down comes that threatening muzzle—but the audience is scarcely moved by this unseemly episode amid the carnage.” Hannoosh notes that Baudelaire neglects the activity at the center of the ring, instead focusing on the comic brutality of the foreground. See Baudelaire, “Some Foreign Caricaturists,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 192, and Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature*, 221.

<sup>78</sup> Russell, *Jacques Callot*, 158-59.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

caricatures which possess an “eternal element” for Baudelaire, also fits nicely with the *l’art pour l’art* perspective that the latter aligns with the grotesque, for his art has certain qualities—comedy, horror, the transgression of boundaries—that transcend culture and circumstance.

### ***Actors and Acrobats, Dancers and Dwarves***

Among Callot’s best-known theatrical works are two collections, *Balli di Sfessania* and *Varie Figure Gobbi*, both of which may aid in interpreting Callot’s grotesque. The *Gobbi* are whimsical dwarf figures for which Callot likely drew inspiration from court life in Florence, where dwarves were said to entertain the Medici and participate in festival performances. Like *Temptation*, the frontispiece for *Gobbi* features anal imagery, though this time with an overtly comical effect: Callot depicts one dwarf tickling the rear of another with a stick, while the rest of the group looks on with bemused interest (Plate 2.4).

The dwarves portrayed individually in the collection are a motley crew, with humpbacks, oversized floppy hats, and exaggerated pot bellies. Like those represented in Plates 2.5 and 2.6, some play musical instruments, others carry a cup, sword, or cane, and a few wear unsightly masks, which “serve the ironic function of disfiguring the already disfigured.”<sup>80</sup> It seems that Callot included a self-portrait among the *Gobbi*, perhaps indicating the comic detachment with which he viewed the series (Plate 2.7).

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 77.



**Plate 2.4.** Frontispiece, *Varie Figure Gobbi*. Etching with engraving, as reproduced in Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, figure 70.



**Plate 2.5.** *Varie Figure Gobbi*, *Le joueur de luth*. Etching with engraving, as reproduced in Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, figure 75.



**Plate 2.6. *The Flageolet Player.* Etching with engraving, as reproduced in Russell, *Jacques Callot*, figure 107.**



**Plate 2.7. *The Potbellied Man with the Tall Hat.* Etching with engraving, as reproduced in Russell, *Jacques Callot*, figure 111.**

Callot's *Balli di Sfessania* consists of twenty-four etchings completed in Nancy in 1622. The works feature *commedia dell'arte* characters in masks who play instruments, brandish swords, dance, and mock each other, all while enacting stylized, often bizarre poses. Though the spirit of improvisatory performance typically eludes even the most skilled visual artists, Callot manages to capture the *commedia*'s physical dexterity and spontaneous comic impulse.<sup>81</sup> Even more remarkable, he does so with his characteristic precision and minute detail, rendering miniature onlookers in twenty-three of the twenty-four scenes.<sup>82</sup>

Of the Callot references identified from Hugo, Gautier, and Baudelaire, only Gautier's satirical description of the seventeenth-century poet explicitly links Callot's art with French characterizations of the grotesque. His words exhibit striking similarities with Callot's stylized, posturing *Balli*:

Nor is the braggart less entertaining, with his chest well thrown out as in Callot's grotesques, one foot planted forward, one hand on his hip, head thrown back, his absurdly long rapier adorned with a no less absurdly large shell, his extravagant and huge plume, his titanic moustache which pierces the heavens with its two sharp points;....<sup>83</sup>

Scattered throughout the *Balli* are several etchings of a figure known as the Capitano, a swaggering parody of a Spanish captain whose prototype may be traced to the

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<sup>81</sup> Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> The microscopic backgrounds often found in Callot's works were produced with a magnifying glass purportedly given to him by Galileo. See Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Gautier, *The Grotesques*, 220.



Roman Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus* figure, introduced in the second century.<sup>84</sup> One such image of the Capitano, shown in Plate 2.8, so closely corresponds to the accoutrements and physical gestures of Gautier's posturing poet that it almost seems as if Gautier had this particular figure in mind when he was writing.<sup>85</sup>



**Plate 2.8. *Balli di Sfessania*, Capitano Mala Gamba and Capitano Bellavita. Etching, as reproduced in Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, figure 15.**

<sup>84</sup> Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> It is certainly plausible that Gautier knew Callot's *Balli*, and perhaps this specific image. For decades, Gautier was a regular, if occasionally unwelcome, presence on the Salon jury that determined whether or not an artist would exhibit works in the prestigious, government-sponsored exhibition staged annually. A trained artist himself, Gautier's knowledge of the art world was developed through both personal interest and professional obligation.

Callot depicts Capitano Mala Gamba with two slender plumes about one-third the length his body extending from his hat, his chest and abdomen thrust forward to create a sharp curve in his back. Both feet of Mala Gamba turn inward and one leg extends forward as a hand reaches back, tilting his sword at an exaggerated angle. Capitano Bellavita faces Mala Gamba, his feet implausibly twisted and his sword thrust between his legs in a mocking phallic gesture.<sup>86</sup> Like the *Gobbi*, both figures wear masks that disguise their facial expressions. It seems likely that for Gautier, the *Balli*'s exaggerated gestures, disfigured physical features, and bawdy humor made them the most representative of the grotesque in Callot's work.

Though Callot's *Balli* are actors, they rarely act on a stage, instead appearing outside where they are accompanied by background spectators who dance, play instruments, and carry on animatedly. A stage would have implied an audience, but Callot makes the viewer's presence even more explicit by including in his work spectating counterparts who watch the actors' performance and look back at the viewer. Gautier's description of the poet likewise alludes to an observer—in this case, the reader—by describing his reaction to the ludicrous spectacle on the page (laughter). Callot's spectators relate similarly to Baudelaire's grotesque, which exists through a viewer's emotional and physiological engagement with a work.

Baudelaire did not associate Callot's name with the English pantomime whose performance served as a grotesque exemplar. Yet the fact that the pantomime was performed in the style of the *commedia dell'arte*, with its conventional stock

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<sup>86</sup> A number of the male *Balli* wear phalluses for comic effect. See Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, 9.

characters and heady comic pace, reveals an aspect of the grotesque not yet explored: parody. The cowardly, self-aggrandizing Capitano represented by Callot japed occupying Spanish soldiers, while the performances of *commedia dell'arte* troupes sometimes lampooned contemporary events or public figures. In addition, the resemblance between certain figures of the *Gobbi* and *Balli* provides persuasive evidence of a relationship between the sets, with the *Gobbi* acting as caricatures of the already parodic and stylized *Balli*. Among the most striking of these relationships is the pair of Razullo (one of the *Balli*) and the masked *Gobbi* playing the guitar, shown in Plates 2.9 and 2.10.<sup>87</sup> Both figures wear similar costumes with capes, plumed hats, and masks with a protruding nose; both stand with the legs wide apart, weight balanced on the back leg while strumming a stringed instrument.

The *Gobbi*'s ironic variation on the exaggerated Razullo acquires another self-reflexive layer of parody when considered against Callot's own image among the comically debased dwarves. His self-portrait, with its pompom buttons and slashed costume, may be seen as a churlish, pot-bellied caricature of the Capitano among his own *Balli*: a parody that links the theatrical tradition of the Capitano with portrayals of this figure in Callot's own oeuvre, while also parodying the historical convention of self-portraiture in art.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 94.



**Plate 2.9. *Razullo and Cucurucu*. Etching, as reproduced in Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, figure 19.**



**Plate 2.10. *Masked Comedian Playing the Guitar*, a Gobbi parody of Razullo. Etching with engraving, as reproduced in Kahan, *Jacques Callot*, figure 76.**

## The Grotesque as Music Criticism: Hector Berlioz

First published in 1859, *Les Grotesques de la musique* was continuously in print until 1933; it was nearly as popular as *Les Soirées de l'orchestre*, its forerunner.<sup>88</sup> In a tone critical, ironic, and occasionally laced with gallows humor,<sup>89</sup> Berlioz relates musical anecdotes and unleashes tirades against ignorant musicians, critics, dilettantism, and the state of contemporary French music. While Berlioz's work on the grotesque is neither an aesthetic manifesto like Hugo's or a series of reflections like Baudelaire's, it bears some resemblance to Gautier's *Grotesques*, both in terms of its structure and its approach to aesthetics. Like Gautier, Berlioz's *Grotesques* consists of previously published essays (mainly drawn from the *Journal des débats*) and evokes the grotesque intermittently rather than weaving references throughout the text.<sup>90</sup> In one essay, entitled "A programme of grotesque music,"<sup>91</sup> Berlioz hatches an idea for a theoretical concert program featuring the music of "illustrious composers" (*noms illustres*). The repertoire would include Grétry's overture to *La Rosière de Salency*, followed by "Arm ye brave!" from Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus*,

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<sup>88</sup> Hugh Macdonald, introduction to *The Musical Madhouse (Les Grotesques de la musique)*, trans. and ed. Alastair Bruce (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), xv.

<sup>89</sup> Addressing the reader Berlioz writes, "I hope you may take some pleasure in reading it [*Grotesques*]; as for me, I've enjoyed writing it, much as the condemned man's child would no doubt have enjoyed his father's execution." Berlioz, *The Musical Madhouse*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> The potential impact of Berlioz's writings on Ravel is difficult to measure. Ravel acknowledged Berlioz as "a composer of great genius," but he also found that his technique lacked intention, resulting in "a few striking harmonies" which only appeared "by accident, so to speak, and not in accordance with a well-weighted purpose." See M.D. Calvocoressi, "Maurice Ravel on Berlioz," *Daily Telegraph*, 12 January 1929; reprint, *Ravel Reader*, 461. Ravel also famously remarked in a 1931 interview with José Bruyr that "Berlioz was the genius who knew everything instinctively, except what all Conservatoire students master in an instant: how to harmonize a waltz correctly."

<sup>91</sup> Berlioz, *The Musical Madhouse*, 16-18.

a “devilish” violin sonata (Tartini’s Sonata in G minor), an unidentified “quartet from a French opera,” and a variety of other works, including a march, a psalm setting, the fugue from the Kyrie of Mozart’s *Requiem*, and variations for bassoon on “Au clair de la lune.”<sup>92</sup>

Berlioz may have described his speculative program as grotesque simply because of the incongruous variety of musical styles and genres that it unites; like Gautier’s grotesque, which easily traverses the domain of the Cid and the sot, the music in Berlioz’s program combines academic and popular styles, sacred and secular, “high” and “low.” Another reason for his use of “grotesque,” however, is the effect such a concert might exert on an audience. The program Berlioz describes is, in one sense, a vehicle for introducing his commentary on obtuse Parisian audiences who, when faced with Berlioz’s “experiment,” would have it received solemnly and with “loud applause” (a few wondering, “Is this a joke?”)<sup>93</sup> Yet his description also anticipates Baudelaire’s similar use of “grotesque” to characterize both the Pierrot pantomime and its effect on the audience, which generates confusion, uncertainty and *vertige*. The comedic intent of the program, which parodies concert hall conventions and culturally enlightened poseurs, associates Berlioz’s grotesque with the humor and caricature found in Callot’s art and Baudelaire’s essay on *le comique absolu*.

In an open letter addressed to Monsieur [Édouard] Monnais, a lawyer and critic for the *Gazette musicale*, Berlioz describes an evening of entertainment in

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 17, 191n24.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 18.

which one item caught his attention: a caricature of the composer and his *Symphonie fantastique*, created by Étienne Arnal (a comic actor) and Adolphe Adam, composer of *Giselle*.<sup>94</sup> Berlioz characterizes the symphonic spoof as “grotesque”:

The latter [Adam] had written a grotesque symphony in which he burlesqued my orchestration, and Arnal portrayed me, the composer of the piece, rehearsing it. I was shown delivering an address to the musicians on the expressive power of music, in which I demonstrated that the orchestra can express anything, say anything, explain anything, *even the art of tying one's cravat*.<sup>95</sup>

Like Gautier, Berlioz uses the grotesque and burlesque synonymously, applying both to a parody of his music, mannerisms, and artistic creeds. In another instance, Berlioz uses “grotesque” in quite a different fashion when he rails against the paradoxical attitudes of audiences and critics in “Grotesque prejudices,” singling out for special attention the prevalent French complaint that prose is unsuitable for singing. Another excerpt shows Berlioz criticizing the opera *Les Prétendus* by describing it as a “masterpiece of grotesque flannel” (*flons-flons grotesque*).<sup>96</sup> For Berlioz the grotesque seems to evoke comedy and parody on the one hand, incongruity and irrationality on the other. The composer’s description of his *Grotesques* as “horribly jolly” certainly reflects the contradictory hybrids already encountered in the works of Gautier, Baudelaire, and Hugo.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 158, 206n264.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 158. “Ce dernier avait écrit une symphonie grotesque dans laquelle il faisait la caricature de mon instrumentation, et Arnal me représentait, moi, l’auteur de l’oeuvre, la faisant répéter. J’adressais aux musiciens une allocution sur la puissance expressive de la musique, et je démontrerais que l’orchestre peut tout exprimer, tout dire, tout enseigner, *même l’art de mettre sa cravate*.” Hector Berlioz, *Les Grotesques de la musique* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1880), 260.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 157.

## French Vernacular Uses of “Grotesque”

*Trésor de la langue française* provides nineteenth- and twentieth-century references to the grotesque that extend beyond its literary uses, allowing a glimpse into the term’s vernacular applications. References linking the grotesque with the visual arts emphasize its etymological and artistic origins, which were covered by Gautier and Baudelaire. One definition speaks rather broadly of the grotesque as a genre of figurative or abstract ornament, although its accompanying citation, from Michelet’s 1838 *Journal*, associates grotesque figures with masked balls, games, and carnival rather than the visual arts.<sup>97</sup> Another definition characterizes the grotesque as something that “evokes laughter through its improbable, eccentric, or extravagant side,”<sup>98</sup> with synonyms including “farcical,” “burlesque,” “resembling caricature,” “comical,” and “laughable.” An 1872 example of this type, taken from Gautier’s *Guide Louvre*, describes a Scaramouche “swaying his hips in grotesque poses on the trestles,” which couples the grotesque with physical movement, public display, and a carnivalesque milieu.<sup>99</sup> The relationship between comic theater and the grotesque is reinforced by another definition for which the word “clown” serves as a synonym: “Comic dancer who fashions bizarre steps and outré gestures in order to enliven the

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<sup>97</sup> Imbs, *Trésor de la langue française*, s.v. “vertige.” Michelet writes, “Dans la grande salle qui précède, il y a des boiseries grotesques représentant des métiers, des masques, des dominos, tout un carnaval en bois.”

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. “Qui prête à rire par son côté invraisemblable, excentrique ou extravagant.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. The relationship between exaggerated physicality, carnival, and the grotesque is explored by Mikhail Bakhtin in his influential study of sixteenth-century French author François Rabelais. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).



entr'actes of certain works.”<sup>100</sup>

Apart from its association with the comical and bizarre, the grotesque is a term of ridicule indicating debasement or bad taste. Frapié's 1904 *La Maternelle* furnishes a corresponding literary context: “This disinherited one will feel neither the grotesqueness nor the indecency of his attachment.”<sup>101</sup> As an insult, the grotesque is paired with the word “insolent” in another reference.<sup>102</sup>

The examples cited from the *Trésor* closely resemble definitions from a twentieth-century dictionary in print five years before Ravel's death. In the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1932-35), “grotesque” suggests the ridiculous or extravagant; as a noun, it represents a person who “incites laughter in his manners of speaking and acting”—a definition that recalls the stylized movement found in Gautier's description of Scaramouche.<sup>103</sup> In its plural form, “grotesques” refer to the arabesque figures created by Renaissance artists who imitated works excavated from Roman ruins; it also signifies in the fine arts “bizarre and busy figures in which nature is deformed,”<sup>104</sup> with the “grotesques of Callot” cited as examples.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid. “Danseur bouffon, qui fait des pas bizarres, des gestes outrés pour égayer les entractes de certaines pièces.”

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. “Ce déshérité ne sentira jamais le grotesque ni l'indécence de son attachement.”

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. “Un article aussi insolent et aussi grotesque.”

<sup>103</sup> “Qui est ridicule, extravagant...Il est aussi employé comme nom et se dit de Celui qui prête à rire dans ses manières de parler et d'agir.” One of the dictionary's examples evokes Hugo: “Allier le grotesque au sublime.” *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1932-35), s.v. “grotesque.”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. The complete phrase cited above reads like this: “Il se disait autrefois des Arabesques imitées de celles qu'on avait trouvée dans les édifices anciens et, par extension, il s'est dit, en termes de Beaux-Arts, des Figures bizarre et chargées dans lesquelles la nature est contrefaite.”

### **The *Fin-de-siècle* Grotesque: A Composite Picture**

To categorize the grotesque is, in some sense, to defy its very nature. An aesthetic phenomenon that thrives on opposites cannot be contained in a single definition, nor can a law be prescribed for its lawlessness. Claiming that the grotesque abides by no laws, however, negates its conceptual utility, effectively admitting any work that seems contrary or unclassifiable. In characterizing the grotesque, it is essential to recognize that its reach extends beyond its body, grasping the unexpected and unknown, like tentacles in murky water. Surprise is fundamental to its character.

Our study of the French grotesque reveals certain commonalities, however, that may have guided Ravel's perception of the phenomenon in his own music. The transgression of boundaries and unity among disjunction (as opposed to mere contrast) both characterize the grotesque in *fin-de-siècle* France and, to some degree, in modern culture. Yet unlike today's debased grotesque, which evokes abuse and horror, the French interpretation typically remains rooted in comedy and the spirit of the carnival. Both Gautier and Baudelaire consider the grotesque a type of effect exercised upon an audience rather than a catalogue of attributes. The role of parody emerges in Gautier's caricature of writers, Baudelaire's discussion of Hoffmann, Berlioz's description of the symphonic spoof, and the Callot works repeatedly referenced in dictionaries and commentaries on the grotesque. In some cases, physicality becomes an important aspect of the grotesque: consider Gautier's caricature, Baudelaire's account of the *commedia dell'arte* performance, and Callot's bizarre theatrical etchings, each of which features exaggerated and stylized gestures

enacted by personages in elaborate costume for the entertainment of a reader or a crowd. The notion of spectacle may be inverted, too, as is the case in Baudelaire's "De l'essence du rire": a laughing spectator's distorted facial expressions make him the spectacle.

We started this chapter by recognizing the notable absence of Victor Hugo from the *Trésor*'s citations on the grotesque. We end now by acknowledging another figure missing in action thus far: Edgar Allan Poe. Although Baudelaire wrote multiple essays on Poe and used the term "grotesque" in connection with his works, nowhere in "De l'essence du rire" does he mention the American author, choosing instead to focus on his German predecessor, Hoffmann. Yet no discussion of the grotesque in France, or Ravel's early literary and artistic influences, would be complete without turning to the author whom Baudelaire claimed to evoke as an intercessory figure in his prayers.<sup>105</sup> The next chapter turns to the tales and philosophical ponderings of Poe, interpreting his works through the lens of the French grotesque while also considering the ways in which he shaped French perceptions of the phenomenon.

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<sup>105</sup> See Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes*, ed. Jacques Crépet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1938), 49; also Patrick F. Quinn, "The French Response to Poe," in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Regan, 66-67.

### CHAPTER III

#### POE AND THE FRENCH GROTESQUE

I was particularly struck by Poe's importance among French readers during a visit to Paris in July 1989 when the Bicentennial celebration was in full swing and bookshops were crammed with historical works. In the forefront of an elegant shop window was a new edition of Poe, displayed as the focal point with the historical tomes relegated to the background. Poe still occupied center stage, even during the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution.<sup>106</sup>

Poe scholar Lois Davis Vines's unexpected encounter reflects the perennial enthusiasm with which the French have approached Poe's work since the mid-nineteenth century. Baudelaire, who worked on translating Poe's tales for sixteen years, was primarily responsible for introducing the American to French readers. Though his were not the earliest Poe translations to appear in France, they were certainly the most famous; Baudelaire's first effort was Poe's "Mesmeric Revelation," which appeared in 1848.<sup>107</sup> By 1852, Baudelaire had published a fervid life-and-works article that later prefaced *Histoires extraordinaires* (1856), the first in

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<sup>106</sup> Lois Davis Vines, "Poe in France," in *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, ed. Lois Davis Vines (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>107</sup> Vines, "Poe in France," 11. Even before Baudelaire's translations appeared, Poe became aware of his growing reputation in France, noting in an 1846 letter that he believed his name had been mentioned in *Charivari*. As it turned out, the French newspaper had referred to Poe not to chronicle an incipient cultural phenomenon, but rather to discuss a lawsuit concerning rival French publications of his "Murders in the Rue Morgue." See Vines, 10.

a two-volume translation of Poe tales; the second, *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, was published a year later.<sup>108</sup> Successive generations of French writers, including Paul Valéry, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Huysmans encountered Poe through either the Baudelaire translations or the proselytizing efforts of Baudelaire himself.<sup>109</sup> French painters and graphic artists—Édouard Manet and Odilon Redon among them—produced sketches, lithographs, etchings, and woodcuts depicting or inspired by Poe themes.<sup>110</sup> Even French composers were smitten with Poe fever, with Claude Debussy, D.-E. Inghelbrecht, André Caplet, and Florent Schmitt developing works based on Poe tales.

### Theories of Poe's Grotesque

The study of Poe and the grotesque has become a cottage industry of sorts, sometimes flirting with French studies but also extending to German and even Russian literary aesthetics. Grotesque themes appear with enough frequency in Poe's works that the *Poe Newsletter* once published a bibliography specifically devoted to the subject.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>109</sup> The religious metaphor is Baudelaire's own. See *Journaux intimes*, 49.

<sup>110</sup> Burton R. Pollin, "Poe in Art, Music, Opera, and Dance," in *A Companion to Poe Studies*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 498.

<sup>111</sup> See Lewis A. Lawson, "Poe and the Grotesque: A Bibliography, 1695-1965," *Poe Newsletter* 1, no. 1-2 (1968): 9-10. Since this bibliography's publication in 1968, many dissertations and articles devoted to Poe and the grotesque have appeared. The dissertations include Elmer Ross Pry, Jr., "The Literary Grotesque and the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe" (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 1972); Lawrence Stahlberg, "The Grotesque in Gogol and Poe" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1978); Esther Levin Rubinstein, "The Grotesque: Aesthetics of Pictorial Disorder in the Writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Isaac Bashevis Singer" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Albany, 1984); and Leonard Cassuto, "The American Grotesque" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1989). Recent articles on Poe and the grotesque are too numerous to list.

Literary scholars have identified the grotesque in virtually every short fiction genre to which Poe contributed, including the comic, satirical, horror, and ratiocinative tales. Modern scholarly perspectives on Poe's grotesque have some points of intersection with the French grotesque that are worth considering here.

Lewis Lawson claims that Poe's use of "grotesque" in his letters, criticism, and fiction differed from the term's meaning in contemporary American discourse. Poe's grotesque did not suggest the "wildly formed" or "whimsical" that would have been found in Webster's 1831 *American Dictionary of the English Language*.<sup>112</sup> Although Poe was familiar with the vernacular meaning of "grotesque" (having employed it this way himself on occasion), he also used the term in a manner that was informed by his reading of Sir Walter Scott's "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition," a review of Hoffmann's works.<sup>113</sup>

Poe himself applied the term to his collection of stories entitled *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, cryptically noting in the preface to the collection that "the epithets 'grotesque' and 'arabesque' will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales published here"—a statement that has both intrigued and irritated generations of scholars. A glance at the tales in the collection, which includes "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Devil in the Belfry," and "Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling," demonstrates why it is so difficult to identify a "prevalent tenor" in stories of such astonishing variety.

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<sup>112</sup> Lewis Lawson, "Poe's Conception of the Grotesque," *Mississippi Quarterly* 19 (1966): 201.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

Apart from his evasive reference in the preface of *Tales*, Poe elaborated on his conception of grotesquerie in a letter defending the trashy celebrity of tales like “Berenice”:

The history of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted for it to articles *similar in nature—to Berenice*—although, I grant you, far superior in style and execution. I say similar in *nature*. You ask me in what does this nature consist? In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful colored into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical.<sup>114</sup>

G.R. Thompson notes that literary critics often read Poe’s statement as a directory of differing effects ranging from comedy and the absurd to mystery and horror—a laundry list from which the author may choose when creating a tale that will entice the public. For Thompson, however, Poe’s “order and especially his punctuation suggest a continuum” that describes multiple facets of a single grotesque effect. Thompson argues further that many of Poe’s critics have neglected or misunderstood the co-existence of comic, satirical, and Gothic elements in the tales, which easily accommodate both the “single effect” and the fusion of attributes Poe describes.<sup>115</sup>

The extent of Poe’s influence over French writers, artists, and musicians suggests a felicitous link between the French grotesque and Poe’s. For Ravel, in particular, the transmission of themes and attitudes pertaining to the grotesque may have derived as much from his knowledge of Poe as from his cultural surroundings—

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<sup>114</sup> Poe to Thomas White, Baltimore, 30 April 1835, in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 1, ed. John Ward Ostrom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 57-58. The emphases are Poe’s.

<sup>115</sup> G.R. Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 43.

and indeed, Poe constituted a significant part of the *fin-de-siècle* literary culture in which Ravel was immersed. Literary scholars have suggested that Poe had either read Hugo's preface to *Cromwell* in translation or had become familiar with themes in the work after reading about it in a British publication, *The Foreign Quarterly Review*.<sup>116</sup> Burton R. Pollin claims that the true etymology of Poe's grotesque and arabesque derives from Hugo, not the oft-cited Scott review of Hoffmann. To substantiate his claim, Pollin cites certain phrases, themes, and imagery Poe borrowed from Hugo's works, as well as specific, frequently positive references to the figure of Hugo himself.<sup>117</sup> One appears in Poe's review of *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens: "The effect of the present narrative might have been materially increased by confining the action within the limits of London. The 'Nôtre [*sic*] Dame' of Hugo affords a fine example of the force which can be gained by concentration, or unity of place."<sup>118</sup> Poe's preoccupation with formal and thematic integrity emerges here as he appeals to his readers' knowledge of Hugo through favorable comparison.

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<sup>116</sup> Burton R. Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 4; also Thompson, *Poe's Fiction*, 110.

<sup>117</sup> Poe's grammatical mistakes in borrowing and reconfiguring Hugo's words suggests that he read English translations of Hugo, which he then translated back into French. See Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, 15.

<sup>118</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, review of *Barnaby Rudge*, by Charles Dickens, in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G.R. Thompson, The Library of America (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 240. Also quoted in Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, 15.



### *Arabesque and Grotesque*

Thompson finds that discussions of Poe's grotesque must also incorporate the arabesque, since the two were probably linked in Poe's mind. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German writers conceived of both phenomena as different sides of the same aesthetic coin; Friedrich Schlegel, for example, considered each a type of irony.<sup>119</sup> August Wilhelm Schlegel observed "charm, humor, tenderness, wantonness, and sublimity" in the grotesque, drawing his definition from Goethe's *Von Arabesken* (1789), which conflates grotesque and arabesque while defending both styles against classical aesthetics.<sup>120</sup> Scott similarly grouped grotesque and arabesque together in the review of Hoffmann's works, which Poe almost certainly had read.<sup>121</sup> Thompson concludes that because the grotesque and arabesque appear almost interchangeably in Poe's writings, they "refer to a single psychological effect or response having to do with ambivalence, tension between opposites, and a sense of the transcendent ironic vision."<sup>122</sup>

In her dissertation on ornament in the music of Ravel, Gurminder Bhogal considers the grotesque within a perspicacious discussion of the stylistic and etymological origins of arabesque. Bhogal cites Poe, Friedrich Schlegel, and modern art historical dictionaries, most of which fuse arabesque with grotesque.<sup>123</sup> While her

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<sup>119</sup> Thompson, *Poe's Fiction*, 108.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 116-17.

<sup>123</sup> See Bhogal, "Arabesque and Metric Dissonance," 65-67, 85-96.

analysis of pertinent texts is thorough, elegant, and sufficient for the aims of her study, it leaves many questions about the relationship between grotesque and arabesque unanswered.

Although a conflation of the two phenomena may have been prevalent in German romantic aesthetics, the same does not appear to have been the case for contemporary French thinkers. In nineteenth-century France, it was “burlesque” that sometimes substituted for grotesque in Gautier’s work; Baudelaire linked the grotesque with humor when he called it “the absolute comic” (*le comique absolu*).<sup>124</sup> French dictionaries from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries featured synonyms and characterizations for the grotesque that included “bizarre,” “extravagant,” “ridicule,” “caricatural,” “cocasse,” and “risible.”<sup>125</sup> Arabesque was typically not among them.

When the term “arabesque” did appear alongside the grotesque, it was to evoke the abstract ornamental figures found in the grottos to which the grotesque was etymologically linked. The 1932 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* includes “arabesque” in its definition of the grotesque, but not as a synonym. Rather, the term is associated with the archaic etymology of the grotesque: “In the past, it was said of arabesques imitating those that had been found in ancient ruins and, by extension, it is

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<sup>124</sup> Gautier may very well have used the term “arabesque” in his collection of essays; he simply did not pair the term with “grotesque” or evoke it as a synonym, as he did with “burlesque.” To my knowledge, “arabesque” does not appear anywhere in Baudelaire’s “De l’essence du rire.”

<sup>125</sup> See Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*; *Dictionnaire de l’académie française* (Paris: Bernard Brunet, 1762); Charles Le Roy, *Traité de l’orthographe française* (Paris: J. Felix Faulcon, 1775); *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (1932-35); *Trésor de la langue française* (1971).

said to describe, in terms of the fine arts, bizarre and busy figures in which nature is deformed.”<sup>126</sup> The difference in tenses—imperfect versus present—suggests two uses for “arabesque,” of which the former has gone out of fashion. Entries on the grotesque in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dictionaries may not include “arabesque” at all, which indicates that the synonymous use of both terms predates these sources, extending back to the grotesque’s early etymological history.<sup>127</sup> In *Trésor de la langue française*, the derivation of “grotesque” makes no mention of the arabesque, instead citing early descriptions of the grotesque that associate it with ornament, fantasy, laughter, and extravagance.<sup>128</sup>

It is scarcely possible to say to what degree Poe influenced *fin-de-siècle* conceptions of the grotesque, just as it is equally difficult to measure the effect of Hugo’s preface on Poe. What can be determined with some certainty, however, is that arabesque and grotesque are generally not synonymous in the nineteenth- or twentieth-century French mind, although they do share some points of contact. David Ketterer distinguishes between grotesque and arabesque by identifying the former

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<sup>126</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, s.v. “grotesque.”

<sup>127</sup> Yvonne B. Rollins suggests that “grotesque” and “arabesque” may be synonymous in Baudelaire’s theories of modern art and the beautiful, but her primary evidence is Schlegel’s conflation of the terms. The “arabesque” of Baudelaire’s that she cites—in the poem “Mon Coeur mis à nu” from *Journaux intimes*—shares little with the grotesque described in his “De l’essence du rire.” See Rollins, “Baudelaire et le grotesque,” *The French Review* 50 (December 1976): 275.

<sup>128</sup> *Trésor de la langue française*, s.v. “grotesque.”

with deception, incongruity, and humor, the latter with a “fluidity of form, technique, or structure” that reflects the arabesque’s serpentine visual language.<sup>129</sup>

Modern scholars who view the grotesque and arabesque as a stylistic fusion almost invariably use the grotesque’s grotto-esque infancy as a reference point—a time when the grotesque exhibited many similarities with the Islamic-inspired, ornamental designs used by Renaissance artists. German aestheticians like Schlegel believed that grotesque and arabesque were interchangeable terms, both exhibiting a play of form and content exemplified in works by Jean Paul Richter, Laurence Sterne (*Tristram Shandy*), and Denis Diderot (*Jacques le fataliste*).<sup>130</sup> Yet by the nineteenth century, French sources suggest that despite parallel development, grotesque and arabesque have diverged into different stylistic and aesthetic phenomena, as contemporary dictionaries and discourses evidence.

### **Fiction of the Grotesque**

Poe’s influence over Ravel (discussed in Chapter IV) was extensive enough that any potential point of contact between the two cannot be neglected, as Ravel may have formulated attitudes about the grotesque based on Poe’s aesthetics; these in turn may have derived, in part, from Hugo’s preface to *Cromwell*.<sup>131</sup> Baudelaire, who made

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<sup>129</sup> David Ketterer, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 36, 74-75.

<sup>130</sup> Raymond Immerwahr, “Romantic Irony and Romantic Arabesque Prior to Romanticism,” *The German Quarterly* 42 (1969): 673.

<sup>131</sup> It is possible, of course, that Ravel read the preface to *Cromwell* himself, or at least casually encountered it in school or on a bookshop shelf. The preface certainly would have been included in a

Poe an honorary godfather for French literary aesthetes, published commentaries and companion pieces to his translations that may also have sated Ravel's literary appetite. Finding aspects of the French grotesque in Poe's works—specifically, “The Imp of the Perverse,” “A Descent into the Maelström,” and “The Masque of the Red Death”—will build upon the established link between Ravel and Poe, suggesting an aesthetic influence that encompassed, but was not limited to, the grotesque.

### ***“The Imp of the Perverse”***

“The Imp of the Perverse” is one of the most effective, concise specimens of the grotesque produced by Poe. Thompson has even suggested that Poe's understanding of the perverse is “perhaps the ultimate grotesquerie to be found in his Gothic fiction.”<sup>132</sup> In “Imp,” Poe first adopts the tone of a speculative essay, using his first-person narrator to introduce a phenomenon common to all human minds: the irrational impulse to pursue experiences, sensations, and courses of action known to be destructive. For over two-thirds of the story, Poe explores this “perverse” impulse through the abstract musings of his narrator. When the brooding raconteur finally turns to his own experience with the perverse, the reader learns that he is relating his tale to us from a jail cell. After having inherited the estate of a man he surreptitiously poisoned, the narrator had lived for years without experiencing either guilt for his act or concern about the possibility of being caught. Eventually he was overcome by an

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multivolume edition of Hugo's works; such an edition sat of Ravel's bookshelf, though the composer may not have opened or read that particular volume.

<sup>132</sup> Thompson, *Poe's Fiction*, 175.

irrational desire to confess, the words tumbling from his mouth without his bidding or understanding (“Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it”).<sup>133</sup>

Poe’s most compelling description of the perverse appears when the narrator invites us to stand on the edge of a cliff and contemplate the depths below:

We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness and dizziness and horror become merged in a cloud of unnamable [*sic*] feeling. By gradations, still more imperceptible, this cloud assumes shape, as did the vapor from the bottle out of which arose the genius in the Arabian Nights. But out of this *our* cloud upon the precipice’s edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. . . . And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, *therefore* do we the most impetuously approach it. There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him who, shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge.<sup>134</sup>

The moment of hesitation that characterizes the perverse allows conflicting emotions and states of mind to exist simultaneously. As logic or common sense attempts to intercede, the mind continues to entertain an irrational attraction to danger while shrinking from it. If “the perverse is a grotesque,”<sup>135</sup> as David Halliburton suggests, then the narrator’s meditation on falling recalls the single effect noted by Thompson, created from the fusion of contradictory attributes arising from irreconcilable

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<sup>133</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse,” in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Random House, 1965), 736-742.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>135</sup> David Halliburton, “Poe’s Aesthetics,” in *A Companion to Poe Studies*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 442. Richard C. Frushell also associates the grotesque with perversity in “An Incarnate Night-Mare”: Moral Grotesquerie in “The Black Cat,” *Poe Newsletter* 5 (December 1972): 43-44.

emotions—fear, dizziness, delight, horror—battling for ascendancy. Unity, or singularity of the soul, persists despite division within and between sensation and the mind.

Poe's meditation on the abyss as a grotesque experience recalls Baudelaire's literary reenactment of the *commedia dell'arte* performance. Though Baudelaire begins with a description of the actors, costumes, and action, including a graphic recounting of the beheading scene, he soon turns to the effect that the performance (and his account of it) exerts over the viewer/reader. He admits that the whole affair may seem "pale and chilly" to the reader, but that there was, in fact, much to recommend a viewer. Nothing can replace the spectacle of the moment, which provides a concentrated dose of comedy in its purest form; no words can rival the actors' "special talent for hyperbole," which inspires the "terrible and irresistible" laughter of the actor playing the woman, or the ludicrous moment when Pierrot stoops to pick up his own decapitated head and drops it in his pocket.<sup>136</sup> All in all, the performance showcases the sort of "monstrous buffooneries" that sandwich exaggerated slapstick next to Madame Guillotine. Like Poe's contemplation of the abyss, Baudelaire describes the pantomime in terms of its disorienting effect on those who experience it.

He also notes that one of the most remarkable things about the performance was the beginning, when the principal characters appear onstage for a brief prologue.

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<sup>136</sup> Baudelaire's virtuoso description certainly rivals the potent energy of the live performance, having the consequence—intentional or not—of subtly undermining his premise.

There is little hint, he contends, of the farcical action to come; the characters rather resemble the people occupying seats in the hall, with nothing extraordinary about them. Each character plays out a little scene: Pierrot makes comic gestures, Harlequin and Léandre declare their rivalry, a fairy takes the part of Harlequin and promises a pledge of her good faith. As the fairy waves her magic wand, the atmosphere in the theater is transformed, and the audience experiences *vertige*. It is the moment of anticipation that creates sickness, dizziness, and delight—the same physiological sensations produced when we contemplate the abyss from a dangerous perch. Both Poe’s vertigo and Baudelaire’s *vertige* arise from the anticipation of an unknown, potentially dangerous experience. For Poe, the possibility of physical danger merges with the fantasy of falling to create an effect that evokes the grotesque; for Baudelaire, physical danger transmutes into psychological and emotional vulnerability. When the curtain rises, the audience witnesses a comic performance marked by violence<sup>137</sup>—a characteristic trait of Baudelaire’s grotesque.

The primary theme found in “The Imp of the Perverse”—the magnetic attraction to danger—also epitomizes the appeal of Poe’s tales to his readers, who are invited to share in the ruminations of scheming murderers, depraved minds, and calculating sleuths. Though the subjects of Poe’s tales may disgust us, we remain in thrall, captivated by the concurrent horror, beauty, and irony. Just as Baudelaire’s account of the pantomime exemplifies the effect of the grotesque on its audience, so

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<sup>137</sup> Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 159.



too does the pocket-sized “Imp” (only five pages in length) epitomize Poe’s grotesque writ large.

***“A Descent into the Maelström”***

In Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelström,” a Norwegian mariner describes his harrowing encounter with a massive vortex to unnamed listeners who audit the tale. Although a frame narrator (one of the mariner’s listeners) begins the story, the mariner becomes the focal point in the second paragraph when he remarks that “there happened to me an event such as never happened before to mortal man....”<sup>138</sup> As a violent maelstrom forms in the ocean, the mariner offers to tell of his own experience with the vortex, shifting the narrative point of view away from the frame narrator for the remainder of the tale.

The mariner and his seafaring brothers often fished near the vortex but had successfully avoided it until one fateful evening. Although the brothers had planned to leave the vicinity around seven o’clock, the mariner’s watch had stopped at some point, causing the brothers to miss their window of opportunity for a safe getaway. The vortex sucks the mariner’s schooner into a “high, black, mountainous ridge” of water that suffocates whales and churns up ships and trees in its savage abyss (136). Recognizing that an unfortunate rendezvous with the vortex is inevitable, the mariner watches his own ship and other objects spiraling around the whirlpool’s massive

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<sup>138</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Descent into the Maelström,” in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Modern Library, 1965), 127.

orbit. He observes that larger objects sink into the vortex more quickly, and that cylindrical objects—as opposed to any other shape— enjoy slower progress towards the depths. Armed with this knowledge, the mariner ties himself to the cylindrical water cask and hurls himself into the vortex, allowing him to survive the experience. Later, after describing his experience to a schoolteacher, the mariner learns of the physical principle (supposedly studied by Archimedes) that prevented the cask from making a rapid descent through the vortex.

From the beginning of the tale, Poe establishes an atmosphere of quiet menace. As the mariner and his companions stand at the edge of a cliff, surveying the ocean below, the frame narrator notes from a “deplorably desolate” bird’s eye view the “horribly black and beetling cliff” and the blighted islands, “hideously craggy and barren” against the whipping waves of the ocean (128). When the frame narrator first characterizes the vortex, he observes its shape, movement, and color, recounting the “gyratory motion” of the orbit churning a “smooth, shining, and jet-black wall of water” (129). Gradually, however, the vortex evokes conflicting emotional states in the narrator, who remarks that he “cannot impart the faintest conception either of the magnificence, or of the horror of the scene—or of the wild bewildering sense of *the novel* which confounds the beholder.” With these words, Poe disrupts the menacing atmosphere established in the opening and situates the destructive whirlpool in a new context, admitting guarded admiration of the spectacle unfolding below.

When the mariner assumes the role of narrator, he introduces the maelstrom through the eyes of a first-person viewer for the second time. As the vortex absorbs

his schooner, the mariner first describes the shrieks of whirling water and the “writhing wall” of ocean separating his ship from the horizon, but moments later he begins to experience the vortex in much the same way as the frame narrator, who viewed it from the safety of a cliff (135). As the ship grazes the lip of the vortex, the mariner remarks, “I felt more composed than when we were only approaching it [the vortex]...I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner,...” Like the frame narrator, the mariner uses the term “magnificent” to describe his near-fatal encounter with the vortex, mingling sheer terror with aesthetic appreciation. A few moments later, he starts to channel the imp of the perverse (or, alternately, the grotesque) as he experiences the captivating attraction of danger: “After a while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make.” As the schooner sinks further into the vortex, the mariner remarks upon his complicated emotional state: “Never shall I forget the sensation of awe, horror, and admiration with which I gazed about me” (136).

Shortly before the mariner arrives at the false scientific principle which purportedly saves him, he describes the strange, giddy sensation that enveloped him: “I now began to watch, with a strange interest, the numerous things that floated in our company. I *must* have been delirious, for I even sought *amusement* in speculating upon the relative velocities of their several descents toward the foam below” (137). The mariner’s aesthetic appreciation of the vortex ultimately admits humor and hysteria to the pantheon of the perverse.

In the final sentence of the story Poe reminds the reader once again of the listeners who served as an audience for the mariner's account: "I told them my story—they did not believe it. I now tell it to you—and I can scarcely expect you to put more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden" (140). With the end of the mariner's tale comes the end of Poe's, which closes without returning to the frame narrator.

Like "The Imp of the Perverse," "Maelström" locates suspense not within a given phenomenon, but in the psychological and emotional states that result when a phenomenon is encountered first-hand. Just as the narrator in "Imp" contemplates the terror and wonder of a fall, the mariner recalls the "awe, horror, and admiration" he experiences as the whirlpool tows his ship—three emotions that Poe groups together in the singular "sensation" (136). This distinction between the singular that Poe selected and the plural he could have used is important, since it suggests a merging of discrete responses that would normally be considered contrary, if not oppositional.

The central events in both "Maelström" and "Imp" are both imbued with an intoxicating sense of motion: the spiral of the vortex in "Maelström," the fall from the cliff in "Imp." Baudelaire's *vertige*, which characterizes the anticipation and vulnerability of the theater-goer, produces a physiological response: it "fills our lungs and renews the blood in our arteries." The extraordinary physical vulnerability experienced by the mariner in the vortex generates an unusual psychological response that accepts awe, horror, and admiration as part of the same sensation. As he expresses curiosity about the vortex—"a *wish* to explore its depths"—the mariner

identifies himself with the narrator of “Imp,” whose thought of a theoretical plunge expresses “the delight of its horror” through transgressed sensational and psychological boundaries. Both tales reveal a truth in their transgressions: sensation and emotion are not confined, for the borders distinguishing them are porous. The true transgression in the tale is the revelation that no transgression has taken place. It is the fusion of contradictory states, the focus on sensational effect, and the paradox of transgressive devices that evidence the grotesque.

Poe introduces two narrative frames in “Maelström”: the account of the frame narrator and the tale of the mariner. By the end of the tale, only one of the frames is closed; the first narrator has largely been effaced from the tale, and the reader is reminded of his presence only because the mariner makes a few extra-narratory comments directed towards him. Although the ending of the tale may simply reflect Poe’s need to finish in a hurry,<sup>139</sup> the first narrative frame may be considered complete because the narrator later took the time to write the tale down so that we, the readers, might also experience it.<sup>140</sup> Yet the broken frame may also constitute a formal transgression that complements and reflects the transgressive aspects of the tale itself.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> In his correspondence, Poe suggests this possibility himself. See Poe to Joseph Evans Snodgrass, Philadelphia, 12 July 1841, in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 175.

<sup>140</sup> Gerard M. Sweeney, “Beauty and Truth: Poe’s ‘A Descent into the Maelström,’” *Poe Studies* 6 (1973): 25.

<sup>141</sup> Immerwahr might describe the technique this way to remain consistent with German romanticists’ conception of arabesque as a type of irony; the “deliberate intricacies and inconsistencies in the handling of narrative frames” would be of particular relevance to “Maelström.” See Immerwahr, “Romantic Irony and Romantic Arabesque,” 683.

Scholars have sought varying metaphysical interpretations for the mariner's experience in "Maelström." The physical descent into the vortex may have produced a spiritual ascent towards enlightenment, aesthetic appreciation, or obliteration of the self in the face of God or nature.<sup>142</sup> Gerard Sweeney suggests that when the mariner observes the objects swirling about him in the vortex, he is exercising aesthetic rather than logical judgment. The faculty that saves the mariner is not "pure" scientific reasoning, but reason informed by taste; his observation about the rates of descent for spherical and cylindrical objects indicates that "an order is sense and thus Beauty poetically perceived."<sup>143</sup> Tracy Ware likewise questions the validity of science in the tale, noting that it was the mechanical failure of a wristwatch which placed the mariner and his brothers in danger.<sup>144</sup> The mariner only arrived at the principle that orchestrated his survival through hurried calculations and happenstance; passages from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the works of Jonas Ramus "are not cited so much as parodied: they are repeated in a context that makes them ridiculous."<sup>145</sup> If, as many critics suggest, the mariner gains metaphysical enlightenment as he penetrates deeper into the vortex, then his abortive journey might indicate spiritual

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<sup>142</sup> See variations on this theory in Richard D. Finholt, "The Vision at the Brink of the Abyss: 'A Descent into the Maelström,'" *Georgia Review* 27 (1973): 356-66; Frederick S. Frank, "The Aqua-Gothic Voyage of 'A Descent into the Maelström,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly* 29 (1976): 85-93; Christina Murphy, "The Philosophical Pattern of 'A Descent into the Maelström,'" *Poe Studies* 6, no. 1 (1973): 25-26; Sweeney, "Beauty and Truth," 22-25; and Margaret J. Yonce, "The Spiritual Descent into the Maelstrom: A Debt to 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" *Poe Newsletter* 2 (1969): 26-29.

<sup>143</sup> Sweeney, "Beauty and Truth," 23.

<sup>144</sup> Ware, "A Descent into the Maelström," 78.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

rejection and defeat. Thompson similarly finds that the mariner's tale is an ironic one which "inverts traditional Western belief: the narrator's mystical experience of the magnificence of God is one of horror rather than beatitude."<sup>146</sup>

Literary scholars have frequently pointed out Poe's delight in planting false clues (like the mariner's observations about spherical and cylindrical objects) to undermine sequential narrative, or placing misleading words in the mouths of characters to subvert their accounts. Inaccuracies and exaggerations in the mariner's tale, together with Poe's framed narrative structure, suggest that "Maelström" is a parody of the "tall tale," a popular fictional genre with which Poe would have been familiar.<sup>147</sup> The frame narrator's quotation of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and Jonas Ramus establishes "verisimilitude," which is central to the literary hoax; the mariner is not only "selling" his tale to the "tenderfoot," but Poe is selling his tale to us, the readers.<sup>148</sup> The use of a narrative frame, in which one character narrates his account for another, is conventional in the tall tale, but for Fred Madden it is also "epistemological," an area of inquiry first introduced in the tale's epigraph: "The ways of God in Nature, as in Providence, are not as *our ways*; nor are the models that we frame in any way commensurate to the vastness, profundity, and unsearchableness of His works, *which have a depth in them greater than the well of Democritus*" (127). If the mariner's tale is about the limits of human understanding, then "Maelström"

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<sup>146</sup> Thompson, *Poe's Fiction*, 171.

<sup>147</sup> See Fred Madden, "'A Descent into the Maelström': Suggestions of a Tall Tale," *Studies in the Humanities* 14 (December 1987): 127.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-29.

itself may question our own sense of knowledge, and our propensity for being duped.<sup>149</sup> The incomplete frame at the end of “Maelström” may likewise point to the tale’s subversion of conventional structure in the “tall tale” genre. The source of our faulty knowledge is the mariner himself, who litters his tale with absurdities and inconsistencies.<sup>150</sup> In addition to the effect produced by the tale, which merges contradictory sensations into one, the parody at which Poe hints in “Maelström” recalls similar jests in the French grotesque, particularly in the works of Callot.

### ***“The Masque of the Red Death”***

In “Masque,” Prince Prospero retreats from the devastation of a plague by walling himself and a thousand knights and ladies into a fortified abbey, protected by a “strong and lofty wall” and “gates of iron.”<sup>151</sup> Believing it “folly to grieve, or to think,” Prospero throws a costume ball in a suite of seven rooms, each decorated in a different color and reflecting the prince’s “love of the *bizarre*.” In the last of these rooms, arrayed in black velvet draperies with red window panes, hangs an ebony

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<sup>149</sup> Madden, “Suggestions of a Tall Tale,” 131.

<sup>150</sup> These include, for example, the mariner’s hyperbole when describing the storm as “the most terrible hurricane that ever came out of the heavens.” Not only does Norway not have hurricanes, but the storms that do occur there happen in seasons other than summer, when the mariner’s tale takes place—July 10, to be precise. This last of Madden’s assertions may seem excessively critical of Poe’s creative license until we consider that Poe took care to insert the detail about Lofoden’s precise geographical location, as well as the date of the mariner’s alleged experience. See Madden, “Suggestions of a Tall Tale,” 131.

<sup>151</sup> Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death,” in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Modern Library, 1965), 269.



clock which strikes hourly, its somber tones causing the dancers to pause. The revelers themselves wear guises reflecting the prince's penchant for bizarre fashion:

Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm – much of what has been since seen in “Hernani.” There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust.<sup>152</sup>

When the clock strikes midnight, the crowd notices in their midst a masquer who had previously escaped their attention. As word of this “mummer” spreads, the crowd takes up a murmur “expressive of disapprobation and surprise—then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust” (272). The mummer's attire “out-Heroded Herod,” extending far beyond the grotesquerie of the prince by assuming the look of one afflicted with the Red Death. As Prospero rushes through the chambers with a dagger, the mummer quickly turns to confront the prince, who drops his knife and falls to the carpet, dead. The revelers who grab hold of the mummer are shocked to find that his costume conceals no physical form, and one by one, each dies:

And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all (273).

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<sup>152</sup> Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death,” 271. Pollin discusses the implications of evoking Hugo's “Hernani,” revealing similarities in characterization, plot structure, and use of the grotesque between this play and Poe's “Masque.” See Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, 2-10.

Like his Shakespearean namesake, Poe's Prospero retreats from reality into an illusion of his own making.<sup>153</sup> The interior of the prince's abbey, which indulges his bizarre tastes and deluded desire for pleasure, nevertheless contains a large clock that interrupts the revelers, indicating that time—and the consciousness of time—persist in the prince's fantasy. For Richard Wilbur, the revelers themselves represent the realm of dreams, "veiled and vivid creatures of Prince Prospero's rapt imagination" divorced from physical, temporal consciousness.<sup>154</sup> Though the "heart of life" beats in the six rooms inhabited by revelers, the clock in the seventh may also function as the "clock of the body," the sustaining mortal heartbeat that shatters fantasy by reminding the dancers of their own mortality.<sup>155</sup> When the clock strikes midnight, Prospero sees the mummer from the blue room, a color associated with birth; as he moves through the other rooms (seven in total, said by some commentators to represent the seven ages of man), he encounters the mummer in the black and red room, death's colors.<sup>156</sup>

Poe never calls the masquer the Red Death, instead using a variety of appellations that include "the mummer," "the stranger," and "the intruder." The

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<sup>153</sup> Thompson finds this illusion "sinister" in contrast to Prospero's "enchanted island." See Thompson, *Poe's Fiction*, 122.

<sup>154</sup> Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 68.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 68-69; also Joseph Patrick Roppolo, "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 141. For another point of view on the role of the clock, see Patricia H. Wheat, "The Mask of Indifference in 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 19 (Winter 1982): 53. Wheat notes that while the clock may be a reminder of mortality, it is also "a man-made device, and within man's control."

<sup>156</sup> Roppolo, "Meaning and 'The Masque,'" 141.

mummer, who wears a mask or “cheat,” is “literally ‘The *Mask* of the Red Death,’ not the plague itself, nor even—as many would have it—the all-inclusive representation of Death.”<sup>157</sup> The true horror of the tale emerges when the revelers find no human form inside the mummer’s costume, for what kills is “man’s creation, his self-aroused and self-developed fear of his own mistaken concept of death.”<sup>158</sup>

Commentators usually identify the grotesque in “Masque” by turning to Poe’s descriptions of the costumed revelers and the variously appointed rooms. Wolfgang Kayser finds these descriptions “perhaps the most complete and authoritative definition any author has given of the grotesque,” citing their fusion of “different realms” and “beautiful, bizarre, ghastly, and repulsive elements.”<sup>159</sup> Pollin believes similarly, locating the grotesque in the tale’s “music, dancing, and decoration...counterpoised to the ugliness of the plague and the terror of the grave”; he attributes the thematic opposition to Hugo’s influence.<sup>160</sup> Yet the tale’s grotesquerie may also be seen in its mocking, ironic theme, which Thompson identifies as a “perverse joke”: Prospero has “walled in death in a frenetic attempt to wall it out.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid. Roppolo also notes that the original title for “Masque” when it had appeared in the May 1842 issue of *Graham’s Lady and Gentleman’s Magazine*, was “The Mask of the Red Death. A Fantasy.”

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>159</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque*, 78-79.

<sup>160</sup> Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, 5.

<sup>161</sup> Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction*, 122.

In places, “Masque” bears a sing-song rhythm, a fairy-tale rhetoric that more typically characterizes the realm of princes and knights in a fantastic, castle-like setting. When Poe introduces the character of Prospero, he uses a rhythmical cadence whose repetition and clarity belie the tale’s sinister themes: “But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious” (269). Many subsequent sentences in the opening paragraphs adopt a simple, direct structure rather than the discursive patterns often found in Poe’s writing:

This wall had gates of iron.  
The abbey was amply provisioned.  
The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think (269).

The last line of the tale mimes the cadence of the opening, like a nursery rhyme gone awry: “And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (273). Though the central action revolves around a ball, a conventional device in fairy tales, the narrative resolves when the characters in attendance die—a laughably unconventional outcome.

Geoffrey Harpham takes the notion of satire in “Masque” even further, suggesting that the tale is a macrocosmic parody of creation and life, with the ball “an image of all human activity” between birth and death.<sup>162</sup> Poe’s excesses and “freakshow tawdriness” may be viewed, then, as self-referential grotesqueries that “shatter his own illusion, to make us doubt ourselves, to make us contemptuous of

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<sup>162</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 120-121.

him who had so enchanted us.”<sup>163</sup> Frederick Burwick draws a parallel between Poe and Gautier, who “recognized the grotesque of literary ineptitude” whose “consequences are all the more grotesque when the author has been striving for sublime grandeur.”<sup>164</sup> At times, the sinister and the campy in “Masque” are difficult to reconcile. Like the dualistic trick image that may be alternately viewed as a duck or a rabbit, Poe’s tone in “Masque” cannot be fully appreciated from one perspective, for the reader’s mind roves from one contradiction to another.

In “Masque,” Harpham suggests that the grotesque emerges in the mediation between “life and death, organic existence and aesthetic design,” just as Poe’s fiction generally demonstrates his obsession with “liminal states” like dreams, premature burial, and hypnotism.<sup>165</sup> If the grotesque defies categorization by transgressing limits, then breaching the barrier that distinguishes life from death may be the ultimate grotesque act. The revelers in “Masque” exist in a realm not only removed from reality, but specially designed to shut reality out; within their fantasy, they hover in the timeless space between life and death, reminded of their mortality only by the clock’s chimes. Roppolo’s observation that Poe never refers to the masquer as the Red Death reveals the incapacity to contain him: the figure is called by many names but cannot be named or categorized. The fact that there is nothing inside the mummer’s costume extends the transgression, for the “fear of death” has somehow

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>164</sup> Frederick Burwick, “Edgar Allan Poe: The Sublime and the Grotesque,” *Prism(s): Essays in Romanticism* 8 (2000): 98.

<sup>165</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 118.

been animated like a living being. Even the narrator of the tale occupies ambiguous liminal space; the first-person “I” last appears in the sixth paragraph from the end, while the narration continues after all the revelers (and presumably the narrator) are dead.<sup>166</sup>

Prospero relies on castle walls to maintain the spiritual separation of the living soul from the dead, but both boundaries are more flimsy than they seem: “When the Red Death stands in the shadow of the clock, temporality and atemporality, outside and inside, and mask and masque, merge. The point, of course, is that they have never been truly apart.”<sup>167</sup> As with the sensational boundaries explored in “Imp,” the true transgression in “Masque” emerges in the tale’s final revelation: that boundaries presumed to be impregnable are porous—or altogether illusory.

### **The Grotesque as Temporal Displacement**

Though the experience of reading always involves a temporal dimension, the grotesque may heighten this experience by underscoring the reader’s perception of time. “The Masque of the Red Death” and “A Descent into the Maelström” posit a link between the temporal experiences of readers and narrators and the grotesque as a byproduct of temporal displacement. Paul Ricoeur explores this phenomenon in his

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<sup>166</sup> David R. Dudley notes that the narrator not only lives to tell the tale, but also to compare it with a theatrical performance roughly contemporary with Poe’s “Masque.” The narrator states, “There was much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of what *has been since seen in Hernani*” (emphasis added). See Dudley, “Dead or Alive: The Booby-Trapped Narrator of Poe’s ‘Masque of the Red Death,’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 (1993): 170.

<sup>167</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 116.

three-volume study, *Time and Narrative (Temps et Récit)*, drawing on A.A. Mendilow's distinction between "tales of time" and "tales about time." Though all narratives take time to unfold, only in certain cases is the "experience of time" central to the tale.<sup>168</sup> The same could be said of the grotesque: while the interaction with a work (whether musical, literary, or artistic) is always a temporal experience for the subject, many grotesque works are explicitly "tales about time," foregrounding cadence, chronological time, narrated time, and the interplay of time and memory.<sup>169</sup>

Virginia Swain's recent study of Baudelaire offers a persuasive comparison between the grotesque and allegory that treats both as temporal processes of interpretation. Like the grotesque, allegory embodies a contradictory duality, with literal and figurative meaning co-existing in the same linguistic expression; in fact, Swain argues, French rhetoricians described allegorical structure and the grotesque in similar terms.<sup>170</sup> In "De l'essence du rire," Baudelaire's theory of allegory and his roving reflections on the grotesque find common ground, their similarities accentuated by the fact that Baudelaire's illustrations of the grotesque are often drawn from the realm of language and rhetoric.

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<sup>168</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 101.

<sup>169</sup> These categories of temporal experiences are also drawn from Ricoeur, although their relationship to the grotesque is my own invention. See *Time and Narrative*, 78-79, 105.

<sup>170</sup> Virginia E. Swain, *Grotesque Figures: Baudelaire, Rousseau, and the Aesthetics of Modernity*, Parallax: Re-Visions of Culture and Society (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 12-13.

Baudelaire's first reference to the grotesque in "De l'essence" demonstrates the convergence of allegory with a gradual effacement of meaning that renders ancient symbols grotesque:

As for the grotesque figures left to us by antiquity, the masks, the bronze figurines, the muscle-bound Herculesees, the little Priapuses with their tongues curled in the air and their pointy ears, all cerebellum and phallus,...I think that all those things are full of seriousness. Venus, Pan, Hercules, were not laughable characters. We laughed at them after the coming of Jesus, with Plato and Seneca helping....All the extravagant fetishes that I cited are only signs of adoration, or at the most symbols of force, and not at all emanations of an intentionally comic spirit. Indian and Chinese idols do not know that they are ridiculous; the comic is in us Christians.<sup>171</sup>

Under this new belief system, Venus and Hercules, once invested with supernatural power, become abstractions that are linked, like caricatures, with reductive notions of beauty and strength; the name of Venus no longer conjures "a revered god, but an allegorical figure."<sup>172</sup> Like allegory, which requires a second reading to appreciate its "double, differential meaning," Baudelaire's grotesque emerges from a temporally displaced interpretive act that produces "a cleavage within a proper name or sign."<sup>173</sup>

In *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné*, Hugo explores the relationship between a grotesque present and an eternal, idyllic, or otherwise memorialized past. The novel's

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 15 (translation Swain's). "Quant aux figures grotesques que nous a laissées l'antiquité, les masques, les figurines de bronze, les Hercules tout en muscles, les petits Priapes à la langue recourbée en l'air, aux oreilles pointues, tout en cervelet et en phallus,...je crois que toutes ces choses sont pleines de sérieux. Vénus, Pan, Hercule, n'étaient pas des personnages risible. On en a ri après la venue de Jésus, Platon et Sénèque aidant....Tous les fétiches extravagants que je citais ne sont que des signes d'adoration, ou tout au plus des symboles de force, et nullement des émanations de l'esprit intentionnellement comiques. Les idoles indiennes et chinoises ignorant qu'elles sont ridicules; c'est en nous, chrétiens, qu'est le comique!" See Baudelaire, "Essence du rire," 533-534. I altered the last phrase of Swain's translation.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.



central character, a man imprisoned and scheduled for execution, is at the threshold of death, where “physical and psychological barriers” separate the man from society, prison guards, and even other prisoners.<sup>174</sup> To evoke the man’s experiences with his trial, imprisonment, and pending execution, Hugo relies on the familiar vocabulary of the grotesque: the man watches his trial with a “mixture of horror and detachment” (indeed, the trial itself is described as “grotesque”). When his surroundings start to appear as distorted projections of his state of mind, the prison “is transformed into a sinister hybrid that is simultaneously alive and inanimate...”<sup>175</sup>

Recalling the days before his imprisonment, the man describes opportunity, freedom, and romance, but also notes that his mind largely invented these experiences, weaving “inexhaustible arabesques on the poor and coarse web of life.” Though he was acutely aware of the passage of time before his imprisonment—“I had as many thoughts as there were days, hours, and minutes”<sup>176</sup>—he now lives through fantasy consciously removed from quotidian activities. The man’s very awareness of time motivates him to blunt its sweeping influence, as he savors each imagined experience as though it was the “object of a future memory.”<sup>177</sup> This mode of living ironically fulfills its function when the imprisoned man reflects upon the catalogued,

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<sup>174</sup> Merhi, “Distortion as Identity,” 15.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>176</sup> Victor Hugo, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, trans. Geoff Woollen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>177</sup> The notion that the present “anticipates its own pastness,” particularly in modern life, serves as the central tenet of Mark Currie’s study on time and narrative. See Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time*, The Frontiers of Theory (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 11.

memorialized events that he had once stored up in anticipation of his future. He lives for five weeks under a death sentence in which he is “frozen by its presence”: the sentence is as much temporal as existential, for the man is bound not just by prison walls, but also by the inescapable constraints of the moment, which impel him ever closer to his fate.

Like Hugo’s condemned man, Poe’s narrators experience the grotesque through the interaction of the interior mind and its exterior surroundings: psychological transformation initiated by extraordinary circumstance, or vice versa. Although any change effected in the mind takes time, both writers situate this temporal process in the foreground, drawing attention both to the transformation itself and the time it takes to unfold. The same may be said for Poe’s reader, who experiences the grotesque in at least two temporal modes: the “clock” time that ticks by while reading, and the narrated time of the tale itself.

Ricoeur’s lexicon for the temporal experience of narrative includes two types of time—narrated time and the time of narration—whose interaction generates a third type, the “fictive experience of time.”<sup>178</sup> Because time is lived, not narrated, there exists a tension between the time of narration and time lived; narrated time negotiates this disjunctive relationship. Though narrated time may be measured through days, months, or years, it also enacts more subtle flexions of time, or temporal compressions. These compressions “consist in skipping over dead time, in precipitating the progress of the narrative by a staccato rhythm in the expression

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<sup>178</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 77.

(*Veni, vidi, vici*), in condensing into a single exemplary event iterative or durative features ('every day,' 'unceasingly,' 'for weeks,' 'in the autumn,' and so on)."<sup>179</sup> In Ricoeur's analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the varied temporal experiences of the characters shape their present and past relationships, for despite the backdrop of "chronological time," represented by clocks and bells, the internal time of each character is "pulled back by memory and thrust ahead by expectation."<sup>180</sup> Even as time affects the novel's characterization and plot, it also becomes the locus of its own story. As time edges into the tale's foreground, the temporal act of reading shifts from latent to conscious as the reader grows aware of her own experience with fictive time.

### ***Fictive Temporal Strategies in "Masque"***

Even before the reader meets the ominous ebony clock in "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe makes time and tempo central, both to the reader's experience and the narrative trajectory itself. The tale's opening sentence—"The 'Red Death' had long devastated the country"<sup>181</sup>—provides no markers for place or calendar time, but temporally situates the narrative within an ongoing saga. By the end of a brief first paragraph, the reader learns the devastating, ultimately fatal effects of the disease which runs its course within half an hour. The narrator contrasts the speedy

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>181</sup> Poe, "Masque of the Red Death," 269.

execution of the Red Death's pathology with the extended self-quarantine of Prince Prospero, who is in the "fifth or sixth month of his seclusion" when the tale begins (269). In the opening paragraphs, Poe alludes to four specific varieties of time: 1) the time of the narrative; 2) the chronological length of Prospero's retreat; 3) the pathological pace of the disease, and 4) the duration that an infected person would live—measured, like the Red Death's pace, by the clock.

In addition to these fictive temporalities, the reader remains aware of her own temporal experiences—the time it takes to read the tale, the physiological time of her own body—which she uses to measure and interpret the tale's portrayals of time. As the tale's tempo shifts from a temporally compressed shorthand to a lavish description of the abbey's rooms, Poe continues to draw the reader's attention to temporality by introducing the clock. The narrator lingers over the sound of the clock's pendulum, its face, and its voice when it chimes the hour:

Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical,...(270).

In this account of time's progress through the hour, time ironically slows for the reader; the narrator's sentences are no longer simple, linear structures but discursive edifices with clauses strung together like extravagant rooms, each one opening into the next.

The revelers react to the chiming clock with apprehension, perhaps because their temporally suspended state renders them incapable of perceiving the sort of time

that marks mortal experience. An hour later, or “three thousand and six hundred seconds of the Time that flies,” the revelers find their merrymaking interrupted once again by the clock (271). When they hear the clock chime midnight, the mummer advances on the prince, who falls dead “within the shadow of the ebony clock,” followed shortly by the revelers (273). The narrator, who either manages to survive or somehow tells his tale from beyond the grave,<sup>182</sup> notes in the final paragraph that “the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay.”

In the tale’s opening, the time of narrative, physiological time, duration, and chronological time converge. Another author writing a different tale might have employed multiple temporalities to portray the various perceptions of characters, or to heighten contrast between different settings; for Poe, however, temporal variety generates uncertainty for the reader, heightening her sense of anticipation. As the tale moves from the abbey’s exterior appearance to its interior appointments, chronological time gradually imposes itself upon the proceedings. The revelers, who experience musical time and internal, physiological time (represented by the heartbeat), lose the former to the clock’s hourly chimes. By the end of the tale, the revelers surrender physiological time as well, fatally dispatched by the Red Death. In

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<sup>182</sup> Leonard Cassuto believes that the narrator is Death himself, which resolves the question of how he survives the epidemic but introduces other problems, chief among them a narrative tone very much out of character for Poe. For Dudley, one of the narrator’s remarks, in particular, seems absurd given Cassuto’s proposition: “Moreover, if we were to accept Death as the narrator of ‘Red Death,’ we would have to imagine the Grim Reaper chattily showing off his knowledge of the latest in French theater. That sounds more like Woody Allen than Edgar Allan Poe,…” See Cassuto, “The Coy Reaper: UnMasque-ing the Red Death,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 25 (July 1988): 317-320; Dudley, “Dead or Alive,” 171.

a strange twist, the “life” of the clock, somehow linked with the lives of the revelers, is also extinguished: an emblem of mortality that succumbs to its own symbolism.

The reader, of course, survives the scare, and so too do the temporalities she brings to the tale: the chronological, physiological, and fictive experiences of time. As the tale’s various temporalities prove insufficient, the reader also imposes her own temporal experience on the narrative. Musical time ceases with the Red Death’s appearance, physiological time with the ravages of the disease, clock time with the death of the revelers. Only narrative time remains—the one form of time partially controlled by the reader, who negotiates the narrator’s tempo at her own pace.

Like Prospero’s fortified walls, narrative presumes limits: the author conditions the reader to narrative tempo and temporality, while acknowledging that all readers will interact with the tale differently. Yet just as the Red Death’s presence in the abbey reveals the transgression of Prospero’s physical barrier, so does the reader’s experience with “Masque” breach assumed boundaries that distinguish reading, narrating, and writing. The mummer, once unmasked, has no physical form; the reader similarly unmask and outlasts the tale’s temporalities through the act of reading. If the tale’s physical and psychological transgressions manifest the grotesque, then its various temporalities amplify and refract them, inviting the reader to remake the tale’s temporalities and thus redefine the narrative experience. The reader, who begins the tale as an observer, finishes as a survivor—the only one, given the ambiguous status of Poe’s narrator, whose temporality extends beyond the narrative.

### *Vertiginous Reading in “Maelström”*

In “A Descent into the Maelström,” temporal processes embedded in the narrative—and, implicitly, in the activity of reading—make Poe’s grotesque an interpretive act created by the very processes that complicate the reader’s understanding of the tale. Poe relies on the memories of both the frame narrator and the mariner to relate the tale, generally remaining in the simple past and past perfect tenses. After the frame narrator offers a description of his first-hand encounter with the vortex, he diverges from his recollections to insert a lengthy quotation by Jonas Ramus, presumably a travel writer of some sort. The passage, introduced and quoted in the present tense (the time of the tale’s telling) rather than the past (the time of the tale itself) provides a description of the vortex that is, by the narrator’s admission, “exceedingly feeble” (129). Next to his own vivid first-hand account, the Ramus passage seems extraneous and digressive, jamming the tale’s brisk narrative pace.<sup>183</sup>

When the mariner takes over the first-person narration, he recalls his own experience with the vortex, relying on devices common to both memory and story-telling. His tale begins with a temporally compressed recounting of his perilous fishing habits. After establishing context and setting, the mariner settles into the tale proper; as it unfolds, his occasional asides to his auditors wrench them/us from the tale’s present (told in the past tense) to their/our present. Transition in tone, tense, and sense of time often seems abrupt. Such is the case when the mariner recalls with

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<sup>183</sup> A similar digression appears shortly thereafter, when the frame narrator revisits to the present tense in order to cite information from the Encyclopedia Britannica. See “Maelström,” 131.

horror that he has run out of time to escape the vortex, then immediately launches into a dispassionate explanation of nautical terminology:

I dragged my watch from its fob. It was not going. I glanced at its face by the moonlight, and then burst into tears as I flung it far away into the ocean. *It had run down at seven o'clock! We were behind the time of the slack, and the whirl of the Ström was in full fury!*

When a boat is well built, properly trimmed, and not deep laden, the waves in a strong gale, when she is going large, seem always to slip from beneath her—which appears strange to a landsman—and this is what is called *riding*, in sea phrase (134).

Similar temporal irruptions occur when the mariner refers to his own memories within the tale's telling. He notes that it is partly memory that saves him from the vortex, for he recalls that among the wreckage littering the coasts of Lofoden were some objects that had emerged from the maelstrom relatively unscathed. He evokes still another memory—chronologically lodged between his encounter with the vortex and his telling of the tale—when he describes several conversations with a school teacher regarding the scientific principle whose precepts he had unwittingly followed. When he later forgets the explanation that the school teacher provided, however, he raises questions about the reliability of his memory and, by extension, his account of the vortex. At such moments the mariner's "very inability to tell becomes telling," for his frank declarations of ignorance manifest his own truthfulness.<sup>184</sup> Yet the tale may reveal much more than the polarity between falsity and veracity: it also expresses the indeterminate properties of memory. Whether the mariner's tale is "true" in terms of its sequence and description of events

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<sup>184</sup> Leland S. Person, "Trusting the Tellers: Paradoxes of Narrative Authority in Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelström,'" *Journal of Narrative Technique* 23 (January 1993): 51.



scarcely matters if the mariner accepts it: once accepted, his memory will generate its own autobiographical truth.

Had the tale remained in the mariner's past, without explicit references either to memory or to the presence of auditors, Poe's elaborate frame narrative may indeed seem needlessly digressive. Instead, these digressions are critical to the tale's effect: by circumventing a temporally linear reading, the narrative pools divergent experiences with time and memory to arrive at a single, central experience: the vortex. Poe achieves the temporal disjunction that ultimately evokes the grotesque by setting clock time, memory, and the reader's own experience of fictive time simultaneously in motion, like cogs in a mechanical clock—each linked with the other but moving at a different pace.

The insufficiency of clock time to map experience is evident when the mariner fecklessly attempts to rely on it. When fishing with his brothers in dangerous waters, he keeps track of time to ensure his party's safety, noting that "it was just seven, *by my watch*" when the group headed home (132). Though the looming storm suggests that the mariner had somehow mistimed his return, he continues to track time chronologically: "In a minute, the storm was upon us—in less than two the sky was entirely overcast—..." (133). Even after the mariner realizes that his watch has stopped ("*It had run down at seven o'clock!*"), he marks subsequent events by the yardstick of clock time:

It could not have been more than two minutes afterwards...(135).

How often we made the circuit of the belt it is impossible to say. We careered around for perhaps an hour,...(136).

It might have been an hour, or thereabout, after quitting my smack...(139).

It was the hour of the slack—but the sea still heaved mountainous waves from the effects of the hurricane (139).

If clock time fails to provide a stable accounting of time, memory proves equally unreliable, alternately acting as filter, magnifier, and reflective image. Because the principal narrators each recount part of the tale from their own memories, the story zigzags from past to present and back again; at times, the narrator recalls memories within memories, creating the verbal equivalent of mirrors that eternally refract a single image. When the frame narrator encounters the vortex first-hand, he can scarcely convey its impact, turning instead to descriptions from Ramus and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In evoking these sources, the frame narrator interprets his visceral first-hand experience through the temporal and perspectival distance provided by texts. The mariner, on the other hand, is able to use memory and observation to save his life, but once he emerges from the vortex, he finds that it is less the event itself than the memory of it that impedes his ability to speak: “A boat picked me up—exhausted from fatigue—and (now that the danger was removed) speechless from the memory of its horror” (139). For both narrators the past, expressed through memory, interprets and disrupts the present.

These temporally disjunct narratives form the reader’s fictive experience with time, which jettisons conventional narrative technique in favor of a circuitous,

polyvalent structure. Tense shifts, retrospective narration, and frame narration may loosen a tale's temporal logic, but Poe's narratological approach extends the reach and efficacy of such techniques. The tense shifts cannot be explained as clear cases of analepsis (flashback) or prolepsis (flash forward), even though the changing tenses clearly indicate a different temporal perspective. The reader understands the frame narrator's past-tense narration as a present tense (the time of the tale's telling)—until the mariner starts to assert his own tale. Once immersed in the mariner's retrospective narration, the reader now experiences *his* tale as a fictive present rather than analepsis. Similarly, the shift to present tense during the mariner's interruption cannot be experienced as prolepsis, for the reader re-orientes to the frame narrator's time, making the interruption a present-tense event.

If the narrative structure of "Maelström" mirrors its content, then "dimensions of time and layers of text intersect" in a spiral, or figurative vortex, that yields an aesthetic vision of timelessness.<sup>185</sup> The narrative paths of the frame narrator, mariner, and reader all encounter the vortex early in their trajectory, but it is not simply the presence of the vortex that binds these narratives. When the frame narrator attempts to describe the vortex for the first time, he notes that no "ordinary account" was capable of imparting "the faintest conception either of the magnificence, or the horror of the scene—or of the wild bewildering sense of *the novel* which confounds the

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<sup>185</sup> Salwa Khoddom and Randall E. Auxiers, "Reading the Maelstrom: Narrators, Texts, and Language in Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelström,'" *Short Story* 7 (April 1999): 123, 129.

beholder.”<sup>186</sup> The mariner offers a similar assessment of the vortex: “Never shall I forget the sensation of awe, horror, and admiration with which I gazed about me” (136). Both admit divergent or contradictory emotions to their immediate, sensational response, and both arrive at this response from a harrowing encounter with the maelstrom.

The “vertiginous experience of reading”<sup>187</sup> that Swain considers an aspect of Baudelaire’s grotesque is operable in “Maelström” as well, for the reader’s “vortex” is the product of both content and form. Poe’s foregrounding of time as a central theme heightens the reader’s own awareness of fictive time, thus setting the tale’s temporal disjunctions into relief. Though accounts of the vortex might allow the reader to empathize with the narrators, Poe enables the reader to experience first-hand the vertiginous sensation central to the tale by creating a vortex of disorienting narratives, times, and texts.

### **Poet to Poet: Baudelaire’s Criticism of Poe**

Baudelaire, Poe’s chief translator and advocate in France, produced three essays (published in 1852, 1856, and 1857) in which he discussed the writer’s biography, personal character, and fictional works. The first, entitled “Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et

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<sup>186</sup> Poe, “Maelström,” 129. Compared with the aesthetic appreciation that characterizes the mariner’s and reader’s response, Khoddom and Auxier find the frame narrator’s account of the vortex “inadequate.” See “Reading the Maelström,” 125.

<sup>187</sup> Swain, *Grotesque Figures*, 4.

ses ouvrages,” was first printed in the *Revue de Paris* in 1852;<sup>188</sup> it served as the basis for the 1856 essay, which introduced the collected tales in *Histoires extraordinaires*.<sup>189</sup> Baudelaire included the third essay as a preface to the next volume, *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*. In addition, he wrote six commentaries on specific Poe works, including “Mesmeric Revelation,” “The Philosophy of Furniture,” and “The Raven” (which will be discussed in the following chapter).

The American often serves as a mirror to Baudelaire, reflecting traits and tendencies that the two poets shared in common; in this sense, Baudelaire’s criticism provides at least as much insight into himself as it does Poe. Baudelaire even identifies his own partiality in a translator’s note: “And also, why should I not admit

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<sup>188</sup> Lois and Francis E. Hyslop, Jr., ed., *Baudelaire on Poe, Critical Papers* (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1952), 15, 19. Shortly after this book was published, W.T. Bandy demonstrated that nearly twenty-five of the forty pages comprising Baudelaire’s 1852 Poe essay were derived from a review by John M. Daniels published in the March 1850 edition of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Apparently, Baudelaire also borrowed from an obituary by John R. Thompson that appeared in the same publication in 1849. Bandy believes that Baudelaire’s plagiarism calls into question his first-hand knowledge of Poe’s works in 1852, suggesting it is unlikely that he had read “The Raven” by this time. If we accept Bandy’s theory that Baudelaire was indeed the architect of a journalistic hoax, we may still glimpse greater understanding of his attitude towards Poe with the 1852 essay than without it. Though Baudelaire may not have composed every passage himself, he nevertheless chose specific passages from specific texts, exclusive of the many others available to him; these choices alone reveal something about how he wished to represent his views. It happens that the passages involving the grotesque, cited below, may not be found in either the Daniels or Thompson texts, which suggests that they may be Baudelaire’s own composition. See W.T. Bandy, “New Light on Baudelaire and Poe,” *Yale French Studies* 10 (1952): 65-69; John Moncure Daniels, “Edgar Allan Poe,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 16 (March 1850): 172-187; John Reuben Thompson, “The Late Edgar Allan Poe,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 15 (November 1849): 694-697.

<sup>189</sup> Also important is the relationship between the 1852 and 1856 essays, with the former acting as a template for the latter: as a preface to the *Histoires extraordinaires*, the 1856 essay may also have appeared in an edition of the tales read by Ravel.

that what sustained my will was the pleasure of presenting to them a man who resembled me somewhat, in certain respects, that is to say a part of myself?”<sup>190</sup>

There is little of the critic in Baudelaire’s criticism of Poe, although there is plenty of indignation directed against classical aesthetics, democracy, the United States, and ignorance of all stripes. For Baudelaire, Poe’s tragic life entitled him to greater indulgence when judging his faults, inspiring him to “prefer Edgar Poe, drunk, poor, persecuted, and a pariah, to a calm and virtuous Goethe or Sir Walter Scott.”<sup>191</sup> Baudelaire admired virtually everything about Poe the writer, from his choice of themes and literary styles to his aesthetic orientation and sardonic wit. Couched within this hagiography are references to the grotesque that fall into two categories: metaphor and aesthetics. The metaphorical use of “grotesque” has less utility for Baudelaire’s interpretations of Poe than it does for his own understanding of the phenomenon;<sup>192</sup> the latter category will be considered in detail.

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<sup>190</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Translator’s Note,” in *Baudelaire on Poe*, 166. “Et aussi bien, pourquoi n’avouerais-je pas que ce qui a soutenu ma volonté, c’était le plaisir de leur présenter un homme qui me ressemblait un peu, par quelques points, c’est-à-dire une partie de moi-même?” See “Avis du traducteur,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 348.

<sup>191</sup> Baudelaire, “Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Works (1852),” in *Baudelaire on Poe*, 85. “Je le dis sans honte, parce que je sens que cela part d’un profond sentiment de pitié et de tendresse, Edgar Poe, ivrogne, pauvre, persécuté, paria, me plaît plus que calme et *vertueux*, un Goethe ou un W. Scott.” See “Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et ses ouvrages [1852],” in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 288. We may speculate that Baudelaire, who believed that the circumstances of his own life mirrored Poe’s in many ways, was articulating a wish that he might enjoy similar judgment by posterity.

<sup>192</sup> One such instance of Baudelaire’s metaphorical grotesque occurs when he takes critics to task for censuring decadent literature, evoking “grotesque comparisons” to make his point by contrasting two women, one pretty and one plain, the former “adding all the eloquence of dress to her profound and original charm,” the latter “*owing everything to simple nature*.” Baudelaire ends by stating, “I would not hesitate in my choice, yet there are pedagogical sphinxes who would reproach me for my failure to respect classical honor.” See Baudelaire, “New Notes on Edgar Poe,” in *Baudelaire on Poe*, 121.

In the 1852 version of “Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Works,” Baudelaire describes Poe as a “clownish, ironic and ultra-grotesque talent, whose laugh sometimes resembles a hiccup or a sob,....”<sup>193</sup> In this familiar characterization, he partners the grotesque with comic adjectives (*bouffon* and *ironique*) while simultaneously subverting this description by recalling that laughter—like the grotesque itself—transcends emotional and sensational boundaries: it is a spasm whose symptoms (hiccups or sobs) may be traced either to excessive mirth or exhaustive weeping.

In the same essay, Baudelaire notes that Poe’s tales “contain violent buffoonery, the pure grotesque, passionate aspirations toward the infinite, and a great interest in magnetism.”<sup>194</sup> After translating a second volume of the tales (*Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*), he qualifies his earlier comment, noting that the first (*Histoires extraordinaires*) was designed “to initiate the public” through “tricks, conjecturism, [and] hoaxes,” while the second volume (*Nouvelles histoires*) contained a higher order of fantasy, featuring “hallucinations, mental illnesses, pure grotesque, [and] supernaturalism.”<sup>195</sup> “A Descent into the Maelström” appeared in the first collection (an example of conjecturism and, perhaps, hoaxing); “The Imp of the

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<sup>193</sup> Baudelaire, “Poe (1852),” 38. “Ce talent bouffon, ironique et ultra-grotesque, dont le rire ressemble quelquefois à un hoquet, ou à sanglot, a été engagé dans de vastes bureaux à cartons verts, avec des hommes à lunettes d’or.” See “Edgar Allan Poe [1852],” 250.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 68. “Il y a là-dedans des bouffonneries violentes, du grotesque pur, des aspirations effrénées vers l’infini, et une grande préoccupation du magnétisme.” See “Edgar Allan Poe [1852],” 275.

<sup>195</sup> Le deuxième volume est d’un fantastique plus relevé; *hallucinations, maladies mentales, grotesque pur, surnaturalisme*, etc....” Emphasis Baudelaire’s. See Baudelaire to Sainte-Beuve, Paris, 26 March 1856, in *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois, 344. The letter is also referenced in Hyslop and Hyslop, eds., *Baudelaire on Poe*, 21.

Perverse” and “The Masque of the Red Death,” which explore extreme emotional, physical, and psychological states, were grouped in the second. In both descriptions of Poe’s tales, Baudelaire uses the phrase “pure grotesque,” suggesting a link between Poe’s grotesque and *le comique absolu*, as described in “De l’essence du rire.”

Another connection between Poe’s work and Baudelaire’s loosely theorized grotesque may be found in the latter’s use of the word “vertige.” In discussing the narrative openings of Poe’s tales, Baudelaire’s language evokes a parallel moment in “De l’essence du rire” when the pantomime is about to begin:

In his case every introductory passage has a quiet drawing power, like a whirlpool. His solemnity surprises the reader and keeps his mind on the alert. Immediately he feels that something serious is involved. And slowly, little by little, a story unfolds whose interest depends on an imperceptible intellectual deviation, on a bold hypothesis, on an unbalanced dose of Nature in the amalgam of faculties. The reader, seized by a kind of vertigo, is constrained to follow the author through his compelling deductions.<sup>196</sup>

This vertigo draws the reader into Poe’s whirlpool, where he finds himself captive to the writer’s powers of inference. Baudelaire’s pantomime description lacks any discussion of behind-the-scenes machinations (a stage director perhaps would have stood in for Poe in this case), but his recounting of the prologue and the anticipatory moments before the show invoke a similar merging of sensations, characterized by *vertige*.

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<sup>196</sup> Baudelaire, “Edgar Poe: His Life and Works (1856),” in *Baudelaire on Poe*, 116. “Chez lui, toute entrée en matière est attirante sans violence, comme un tourbillon. Sa solennité surprend et tient l’esprit en éveil. On sent tout d’abord qu’il s’agit de quelque chose de grave. Et lentement, peu à peu, se déroule une histoire dont tout l’intérêt repose sur une imperceptible déviation de l’intellect, et sur une hypothèse audacieuse, sur un dosage imprudent de la Nature dans l’amalgame des facultés. Le lecteur, lié par le vertige, est contraint de suivre l’auteur dans ses entraîantes déductions.” See “Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et ses œuvres [1856],” in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 316-317.



It is curious that Poe's name fails to make an appearance alongside Hoffmann's in "De l'essence du rire." The 1855 publication of the essay postdates Baudelaire's first extensive Poe commentary (1852), although he may have conceived of his essay on the "absolute comic" as early as 1845. That same year marked Poe's introduction to French readers in their native tongue, with a translation of "The Gold-Bug" appearing in the November edition of *Revue britannique*.<sup>197</sup> The tales reached a much wider audience with Isabelle Meunier's translations, one of which landed in *La Démocratie pacifique* in 1847.<sup>198</sup> This tale, "The Black Cat," was a favorite of Baudelaire's and was likely the work that marked his initiation into the singular world of Poe.<sup>199</sup> By the time Baudelaire had read "The Black Cat," he may have already completed much of "De l'essence du rire" and shelved it to make way for other projects.

In the 1856 essay, Baudelaire notes Poe's "prodigious talent for the grotesque and the horrible" before considering the purity of the American's motives and literary passions: "The very fervour with which he hurls himself into the grotesque for love of the grotesque and the horrible for love of the horrible I regard as proofs of the sincerity of his work and the intimate accord between the man and the poet."<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Vines, "Poe in France," 9.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Baudelaire, "Edgar Allan Poe (1856)," in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 91. "L'ardeur même avec laquelle il se jette dans le grotesque pour l'amour du grotesque et dans l'horrible pour l'amour de l'horrible me sert à vérifier la sincérité de son oeuvre et l'accord de l'homme avec le poète." See "Edgar Allan Poe [1856]," 317.

While this pairing of “grotesque” and “horrible” suggests an association between them, it also indicates a differentiation in meaning; if the terms were exactly synonymous, one of them would have sufficed.

### ***Irony, Humor, and Gamesmanship***

That Baudelaire recognized Poe’s humor, irony, and proclivity for hoaxes is also apparent in his criticism, which ranks those aspects of Poe’s art alongside his aesthetic sensibilities: “Poe was always great not only in his noble conceptions, but also as a prankster.”<sup>201</sup> Baudelaire’s appreciation of Poe as a “marvelous jongleur” seems to include not only those hoaxes within a tale, but also the writer’s penchant for self-gamesmanship. Poe establishes a field of aesthetic play in which fabricated challenges and self-imposed rules make possible his imaginative romp through the obstacle course. Before introducing Poe’s aesthetics of the beautiful, Baudelaire considers the importance of his speculations and stunts:

I could introduce the reader to the mysteries of his workmanship, speak at length about that aspect of American genius which makes him delight in a difficulty overcome, an enigma explained, a successful *tour de force*,—which leads him to play, with a childish and almost perverse pleasure, in a world of probabilities and conjectures, and to create the hoaxes which his subtle art has made seem plausible.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Baudelaire, “New Notes on Edgar Poe,” 124. “Enfin, pour affirmer ma pensée d’une manière encore plus nette, Poe fut toujours grand, non seulement dans ses conceptions nobles, mais encore comme farceur.” See “Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe,” 321.

<sup>202</sup> Baudelaire, “Poe (1856),” 115. “Je pourrais introduire le lecteur dans les mystères de sa fabrication, m’étendre longuement sur cette portion de génie américain qui le fait se réjouir d’une difficulté vaincue, d’une énigme expliquée, d’un tour de force réussi,—qui le pousse à se jouer avec une volupté enfantine et presque perverse dans le monde des probabilités et des conjectures, et à créer des *canards* auxquels son art subtil a donné une vie vraisemblable.” See “Edgar Allan Poe [1856],” 316.

Even among his supporters, Poe's subtlety was infrequently recognized; his critics often wished that he exercised greater delicacy, both in his choice of subjects and his handling of them. To describe Poe's work as "subtle" suggests that Baudelaire may have recognized humor, hoaxing, and parody in Poe's works beyond their most obvious manifestations (as in "The Gold-Bug"), perhaps extending to a tale like "Maelström." Even in "The Philosophy of Composition," which reads like a didactic treatise, Baudelaire discovers humorous moments that inform his reading of the work as "impertinent," if not a downright ruse: "'It will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part'—[Poe] says with an amusing pride which I do not consider in bad taste—to show that no one point in its composition is referible [*sic*] either to accident or intuition....'"<sup>203</sup>

References to synesthesia, familiar to readers of Baudelaire and evident in his discussions of *vertige*, sometimes emerge in the Poe criticism as well. Indeed, Baudelaire's formulation of correspondences, found in his 1857 titular poem, may owe much to his earlier characterization of the grotesque as a unity among disjunction, a binding of transgressed sensational boundaries. There are descriptive moments in the Poe essays that read like passages from Baudelaire's poetic works:

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<sup>203</sup> Baudelaire, "New Notes on Edgar Poe," 142. "Je crois pouvoir me vanter—dit-il avec un orgueil amusant et que je ne trouve pas de mauvais goût—qu'aucun point de ma composition n'a été abandonné au hasard, et que l'oeuvre entière a marché pas à pas vers son but avec la précision et la logique rigoureuse d'un problème mathématique." See "Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe," 335.

Edgar Poe loves to set his figures in action against greenish or purplish backgrounds, in which we can glimpse the phosphorescence of decay and sniff the coming storm. So-called inanimate Nature co-operates in the nature of living beings, and like them gives an unearthly and convulsive shudder. Space is extended by opium, which also adds a magical accent to every tint, a more meaningful resonance to every sound.<sup>204</sup>

As in Baudelaire's poetry, backgrounds assume prominence through their appeal to the senses: decay glimmers, garish colors predominate, space expands to encompass a broader spectrum of color and sonority, all bathed in a luxuriant, drug-induced stupor. Baudelaire similarly comments in his preface to "The Raven" on the array of sensations it evokes, perhaps resulting from the reader's grotesque response to the poem's contradictory, sinister *esprit*: "It is indeed the poem of the sleeplessness of despair; it lacks nothing: neither the fever of ideas, nor the violence of colors, nor sickly reasoning, nor driveling terror, nor even the bizarre gaiety of suffering which makes it more terrible."<sup>205</sup>

An analysis of Baudelaire's Poe criticism would not be complete without mentioning "The Philosophy of Composition," a theoretical-didactic essay that accompanied "The Raven." In an 1857 companion essay, Baudelaire's "interpretation" of Poe may be better characterized as gentle plagiarism, borrowing

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<sup>204</sup> Baudelaire, "Poe (1856)," in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 91. "Comme notre Eugène Delacroix, qui a élevé son art à la hauteur de la grande poésie, Edgar Poe aime à agiter ses figures sur des fonds violâtres et verdâtres où se révèlent la phosphorescence de la pourriture et la senteur de l'orage. La nature dite inanimée participe de la nature des êtres vivants, et, comme eux, frissonne d'un frisson surnaturel et galvanique. L'espace est approfondi par l'opium; l'opium y donne un sens magique à toutes les teintes, et fait vibrer tous les bruits avec une plus significative sonorité." See "Edgar Allan Poe [1856]," 318.

<sup>205</sup> Baudelaire, Preface to "The Raven," in *Baudelaire on Poe*, 156-157. "C'est bien là le poème de l'insomnie du désespoir; rien n'y manque: ni la fièvre des idées, ni la violence des couleurs, ni le raisonnement maladif, ni la terreur radoteuse, ni même cette gaieté bizarre de la douleur qui la rend plus terrible." See preface to "La Genèse d'un poème," 344.

specific words and phrases from the American in order to explicate his aesthetics for French readers.<sup>206</sup> Baudelaire notes Poe's preference for brevity, an advantage when orchestrating the work's impression on the reader: "This unity of impression and *totality* of effect is an immense advantage which can give to this kind of composition an altogether special superiority,...."<sup>207</sup> His interest in unity and effect, which together comprise the central premise of "Philosophy," reflects his view of the grotesque as a phenomenon whose "unity...calls for the intuition to grasp it,"<sup>208</sup> in spite of its inherent contradictions.

There are many points of correspondence between the French grotesque and the effects communicated through Poe's fiction. Aspects of parody emerge in "Descent" and "Masque," as well as the transgression of sensational boundaries, including life, death, and altered states of consciousness, often evoked by *vertige*. Manifestations of the grotesque are simultaneously experienced by the reader who, like the mariner in "Maelström," experiences conflicting emotions, sensations, and temporalities. Poe's manipulation of conventional forms, frames, and genres extends beyond mere hoaxing and gamesmanship, for the grotesque effect at the heart of his fiction relies on such transgressive devices to succeed. At times, Poe's grotesque

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<sup>206</sup> This charge takes on greater import when we consider that Baudelaire reprinted passages from his 1857 Poe essay when writing about Théophile Gautier two years later. See Hyslop and Hyslop, eds., *Baudelaire on Poe*, 25.

<sup>207</sup> Baudelaire, "Further Notes on Poe," in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 103. "L'unité d'impression, la *totalité* d'effet est un avantage immense qui peut donner à ce genre de composition une supériorité tout à fait particulière,..." See "Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe," 329.

<sup>208</sup> Baudelaire, "Essence of Laughter," 157.

divulges a paradoxical truth: in subverting boundaries, Poe negates their existence by revealing their unreality.

Ravel, too, found much to appreciate in Poe's fiction, though unlike Baudelaire, he was more circumspect in identifying the reasons behind his interest. The composer considered "The Philosophy of Composition" an essential influence on his development as a composer—and an influence that, by some counts, lasted the length of his professional career.

## CHAPTER IV

### “THE GREAT EDGAR POE”: RAVEL’S POETICS

At the age of seventeen, when Maurice Ravel was entering his fourth year at the Paris Conservatoire, he spent many afternoons reading and discussing art and literature with Ricardo Viñes, a Catalan pianist and childhood friend with whom he attended school. In a journal entry dated August 1892, Viñes wrote that Ravel had shown him a “very somber” sketch he had produced based on Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelström”; he added that Ravel drew a second one, inspired by “MS. Found in a Bottle,” in front of him.<sup>209</sup> Thirty-six years later, at age 52, Ravel embarked on an American tour that included performances and guest conducting in cities ranging from New York to Phoenix. He visited several popular tourist destinations, including Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, and Hollywood, where he had his picture taken with Douglas Fairbanks. The composer also made time for a less conventional stop: the Bronx home of Edgar Allan Poe.

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<sup>209</sup> “Maurice m’a montré un dessin très sombre qu’il a fait d’après une descente dans le *Maelstrom* d’Edgar Poe. Aujourd’hui, il a fait devant moi un autre dessin, très noir aussi, d’après le *Manuscrit trouvé dans une bouteille* de Poe.” See Ricardo Viñes, “Le journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes,” trans. Nina Gubish, *Revue internationale de musique française* 2 (June 1980): 183. Also see Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 22.

Ravel's praise for Poe appears with predictable regularity in biographies, essays, and dictionary entries devoted to the composer and his work. Poe's influence on the composer is widely recognized but little understood—perhaps because, in some ways, it is unremarkable: Ravel was only one of many French musical disciples of the American. Among *fin-de-siècle* composers, Claude Debussy drafted two operas based on Poe short stories: *Le Diable dans le beffroi* and *La Chute de la maison Usher*. Although neither opera was completed, Debussy maintained a detached commitment to both projects for almost twenty years, planning to stage them at the New York Metropolitan Opera as late as 1918. D.-E. Inghelbrecht and Florent Schmitt both turned to the same sources as Debussy: Schmitt produced *Le Palais hanté* (1904), a symphonic work based on “Usher,” while Inghelbrecht completed a one-act ballet, *Le Diable dans le beffroi*, in 1922. André Caplet patterned *Légende* (1908) for harp and string orchestra after “The Masque of the Red Death,” followed by a more popular arrangement of the work for harp and string quartet that appeared under the title *Conte fantastique* (1922-23).<sup>210</sup> Thus it seems curious that Ravel, who discussed Poe with such enthusiasm, did not complete, or even begin, a single Poe-inspired work.

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<sup>210</sup> For an excellent resource listing musical works inspired by Poe, see May Garrettson Evans, *Music and Edgar Allan Poe: A Bibliographical Study* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1939). An updated revision of Garrettson's work appears in Burton R. Pollin, “Music and Edgar Allan Poe: A Second Annotated Checklist,” *Poe Studies* 15 (June 1982): 7-13.



## The Confederate Poe

Although Debussy mentioned Poe with a frequency and fervor that matched Ravel's, the two composers engaged with different aspects of the American's work. In his letters, Debussy typically evokes Poe through casual literary references, indicating his familiarity with several of Poe's tales and poems. One such example appears in an 1891 letter in which Debussy, borrowing a phrase from Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream," describes his romantic attachment to an unknown woman: "Now I must try and find out whether she really possessed what I was looking for, or was I chasing a Void? In spite of everything, I'm still mourning the loss of the dream of a dream!"<sup>211</sup> A similar allusion occurs in an 1893 letter to Chausson; Debussy lifts the phrase "mes journées sont fuligineuse, sombre et muette" directly from Baudelaire's French translation of "The Fall of the House of Usher."<sup>212</sup> In a 1910 letter to Jacques Durand, Debussy reiterates his affinity for "the progression into anguish which is the essence of the 'The Fall of the House of Usher.'"<sup>213</sup> The composer suggests in a 1913 review that Poe's artistic trajectory might serve as a positive model for others; even though Poe was "completely unknown, [he] won the prize in a competition,

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<sup>211</sup> Debussy to Robert Godet, Paris, 12 February 1891, in *Debussy Letters*, ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 32-33. "Maintenant reste à savoir si elle contenait ce que je cherchais! si ce n'était pas le Néant! Malgré tout, je pleure sur la disparition du Rêve de ce rêve!" In *Claude Debussy: Lettres 1884-1918*, ed. François Lesure (Paris: Hermann, 1980), 30.

<sup>212</sup> Debussy to Ernest Chausson, 3 September 1893, in *Debussy Letters*, ed. Lesure and Nichols, 51 (with Nichols's annotations on p. 54). Also in *Lettres 1884-1918*, 51.

<sup>213</sup> Baudelaire's phrase is "journée fuligineuse, sombre et muette." See *Lettres de Claude Debussy à son éditeur*, ed. Jacques Durand (Paris: Durand, 1927), 95; quoted in Jean-Michel Nectoux, "Portrait of the Artist as Roderick Usher," in *Debussy Studies*, trans. and ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 138.

thanks to the beauty of his writing.”<sup>214</sup> Other Poe references reveal Debussy’s knowledge of the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and the short tale “The Imp of the Perverse.”

After 1900, Debussy often referred to Poe in conjunction with his operas based on “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Devil in the Belfry.” Started as early as 1889, *La Chute de la maison Usher* grew increasingly burdensome to Debussy with each passing year; *Le Diable dans le beffroi* also proved a challenge. The composer’s letter to André Caplet in December 1911 is typical: “Music is not helping much, either...I can’t finish the two Poe stories, everything is as dull as a hole in the ground.”<sup>215</sup> By 1916, Debussy suggests that he continues work on the Poe operas as much out of duty as desire.<sup>216</sup>

Besides revealing his familiarity with a number of Poe’s works, Debussy’s letters show him incorporating Poe’s characters, plots, and lexicon into his own colloquial vocabulary. Debussy speaks the language of Poe by borrowing passages verbatim and evoking comparisons with the writer’s plots and imagery (as when he equates the fortunes of the Société Nationale to the ship from *Pym*).<sup>217</sup> Near the end of his career, Debussy considers Poe more a source of vexation than inspiration;

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<sup>214</sup> “On trouve une assez semblable histoire dans la jeunesse d’Edgar Poe, qui, tout à fait inconnu, obtient le prix dans un concours, grâce à la beauté de son écriture.” See Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed. François Lesure (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 230.

<sup>215</sup> Debussy to André Caplet, 22 December 1911, in *Debussy Letters*, 252. “La musique ne m’est pas très secourable non plus...je n’arrive pas à finir les deux petits drames de Poe, tout m’en paraît ennuyeux comme une cave.” In *Lettres 1884-1918*, 218.

<sup>216</sup> Debussy to Jacques Durand, 21 July 1916, in *Debussy Letters*, 316. Also in *Lettres 1884-1918*, 273.

<sup>217</sup> Debussy to Ernest Chausson, 24 October 1893, in *Lettres, 1884-1918*, 58.

literary comparisons and allusions become more infrequent, while complaints about the progress of the operas predominate. Debussy mentions a greater variety of specific Poe works than does Ravel, though this may not necessarily indicate a more comprehensive knowledge of them. The fact that he both projected and completed sketches for at least two Poe-inspired compositions may suggest that Debussy (like Baudelaire) possessed a stronger artistic identification with Poe than Ravel did.<sup>218</sup>

Though Ravel's appreciation for Poe seems deceptively straightforward, his artistic kinship with the writer manifests an aesthetic richness that equals or surpasses Debussy's. While the latter identified with Poe's romantic image and possessed an aficionado's knowledge of his tales, Ravel entered into an aesthetic discipleship with Poe that appears to have lasted much of his life. If the American was indeed the sustaining influence that Ravel claimed him to be, then his tales, poems, and aesthetic theories may invite new and provocative interpretations of Ravel's most cryptic works.

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<sup>218</sup> Ravel had received from Georges de Feure a ballet argument (marked "received 17 March 1914") entitled *Le Masque terrible*, based on Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death." In a letter dated 19 June 1914, Ravel expresses interest in working with Feure on a ballet for London's Alhambra Theatre and suggests that he send other arguments, preferably on "an exotic subject, or a French or Italian festival set in the 18<sup>th</sup> century." *Le Masque terrible* remained in Ravel's musical library, though it seems that the composer never created sketches for the project. See Jean-Michel Nectoux, "Maurice Ravel et sa bibliothèque musicale," *Fontis artis musicae* 24 (1977): 203; also Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 148-149.

Orenstein believes that "Entre cloches" from *Sites auriculaires* "reflects Poe's spiritual influence" and suggests that the pedal point in "Le Gibet" "hauntingly conjures up the tension and terror found in Poe's writings" (*Ravel Reader*, 22). Both comparisons evoke atmospheric similarities between Poe's works and Ravel's—an approach that could have greater value if applied with more rigor and specificity. The immense variety that characterizes Poe's literary style needs to be taken into account.

## Poe as Pedagogue

Ravel's remarks about Poe vary to some degree in their depth, perspicacity and, perhaps, candor; the comments below, taken from articles and interviews spanning the years 1924-1931, are frequently quoted in the secondary literature:

Now, my third teacher was an American, whom we in France were quicker to understand than you [in America]. I speak of the great Edgar Poe, whose esthetic, indeed, has been extremely close and sympathetic with that of modern French art. Very French is the quality of *The Raven* and much else of his verse, and also his essay on the principles of poetry.

My teacher in composition was Edgar Allan Poe, because of his analysis of his wonderful poem *The Raven*. Poe taught me that true art is a perfect balance between pure intellect and emotion.

As for my technique, my teacher was certainly Edgar Allan Poe. The finest treatise on composition, in my opinion, and the one which in any case had the greatest influence upon me was his *Philosophy of Composition*. No matter how much Mallarmé claimed that it was nothing but a hoax, I am convinced that Poe indeed wrote his poem *The Raven* in the way that he indicated.<sup>219</sup>

These quotations leave little doubt about Ravel's enthusiasm for the American writer; one even implies that Poe, Ravel's "third teacher," completes the composer's tutorial triumvirate, sharing the company of Gabriel Fauré and André Gédalge. The first, which compares the aesthetics of Poe with those of *fin-de-siècle* French art, evokes

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<sup>219</sup> Each quotation is taken from an article or interview printed (and, if relevant, translated) in *Ravel Reader*; page citations correspond to this edition. See Olin Downes, "Maurice Ravel, Man and Musician," *The New York Times* (7 August 1927), 450; André Révész, "El gran músico Mauricio Ravel habla de su arte," *ABC de Madrid* (1 May 1924), 433; Maurice Ravel, "Mes souvenirs d'enfant paresseux," *La Petite gironde* (12 July 1931), 394. Of the three sources cited above, the only one originally in French, "Mes souvenirs," does not appear in *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, the French edition of Orenstein's text.

Orenstein notes that "Mes souvenirs" may be a fabrication, since Édouard Ravel challenged its authenticity not long after its publication in *Paris-Soir*. François Lesure has defended the document's authenticity, and with good reason; its attitude and tone are consistent with similar autobiographical and aesthetic statements by Ravel.

esotericism: ideas, perceptions, and cultural attitudes about the function of art and its place in the world. Here, Ravel mentions Poe's poetry in addition to his essay "The Poetic Principle" but simply describes them as "very French." In the second, Ravel mentions only the analysis of "The Raven," referring to the theoretical-didactic work, "The Philosophy of Composition," that accompanied the poem. The "balance between pure intellect and emotion" that he claims to have learned, however, alludes not to Poe's explanatory essay, but rather to "true art": poetry and, more specifically, "The Raven." Ravel deals exclusively with process in the third quotation, expressing his belief that Poe indeed wrote "The Raven" through the method described in "The Philosophy of Composition," using deliberation and deductive reasoning much in the same way a mathematician devises and tests theorems in a laboratory through numbers, calculations, and thought experiments. Ravel's admiration for Poe thus encompasses the American's behind-the-scenes manipulation of words and ideas, the ineffable "Frenchness" of his works, and the Kantian conception of art balancing the complementary faculties of reason and emotion: Poe as ratiocinator, French cultural icon, and aesthetic philosopher all at once.

Despite Poe's prestige among French composers, few would have ascribed their knowledge of musical craft and technique largely to a writer, even one as artistically charismatic as Poe. Ravel's description of Poe as his "third teacher" might have been met with healthy skepticism had the composer not professed this admiration on numerous occasions throughout his life. Viñes, Ravel's erstwhile friend and schoolmate, kept a journal that describes the activities of his youth with

remarkable detail and clarity. At least four references to Ravel and Poe appear in the journal; the first of these alludes to Ravel's 1892 sketches based on two Poe tales. A year later, when Ravel was eighteen, Viñes notes that he came by to return Poe's *Histoires extraordinaires*, adding matter-of-factly that because the copy he lent out had been burned slightly, Ravel had brought him a new one.<sup>220</sup> On another occasion, in September 1894, the pianist describes their jaunt to the wharf, where Ravel purchased an "original" (first?) edition of Poe's works.<sup>221</sup> At the time of the entry, Ravel was starting his sixth year of study at the Conservatoire and had already produced his first compositions: *Ballade de la reine morte d'aimer* for voice and piano, and the piano solo *Sérénade grotesque*.

By 1898, the two friends found their careers pursuing markedly different trajectories. Viñes had captured the 1894 *premier prix* in piano and made his professional début a year later. Ravel, on the other hand, had failed to obtain a prize in harmony for three consecutive years, leading to his dismissal from Professor Pessard's class in July 1895. That same month, Charles de Bériot removed Ravel from his piano class, also citing the composer's persistent underachievement in competitions. During his two-and-a-half years away from the Conservatoire, Ravel managed to produce a few compositions of note: *Sainte* (1897), "Entre cloches" (1897, from *Sites auriculaires*), and his first published composition, *Menuet antique*

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<sup>220</sup> "Madame Ravel est venue avec Maurice qui m'a rendu les Histoires extraordinaires de E. Poe, mais neuves, car celles que je lui avais prêtées, il les avait un peu brûlées." Viñes, "Le journal inédit," 184-185.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 185.

(completed in November 1895, published in 1898). Viñes's last Ravel/Poe entry, dated the same year as the publication of *Menuet*, describes the pianist stopping by the Ravel family home, where he learned from Ravel's mother that the composer had already left for Granville for his summer job—playing piano in the casino. Madame Ravel turned over to Viñes some books that Maurice had borrowed from a Monsieur Fabre: *Croquis parisiens* by Huysmans and a collection of Poe's poetry, translated by Mallarmé.<sup>222</sup>

A mid-century biography of Ravel by José Bruyr describes his youthful devotion to Poe in ecclesiastical terms: "The trinity that marks Viñes and Ravel's religion is Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Edgar Poe—the Baudelaire of *Poèmes en prose*, the Huysmans of *À Rebours*, the Edgar Poe of *Never more*."<sup>223</sup> After 1900, however, evidence of Ravel's zeal for the writer is less plentiful. Few if any Poe references appear in Ravel's interviews or published correspondence from about 1900-1924. The fact that Ravel considered setting a ballet in 1914 based on "The Masque of the Red Death" implies a continued interest in Poe during this interval, though the composer never started work on the project.<sup>224</sup>

By the mid-1920s, interviews with Ravel become increasingly common both at home and abroad, and it is here that we find him discussing Poe's significance as

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>223</sup> "Cependant la trinité marquant la religion de Viñes et de Ravel, c'est Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans et Edgar Poë [sic], le Baudelaire des *Poèmes en prose*, le Huysmans d'*À Rebours*, l'Edgar Poë de *Never more*." Note Bruyr's confidence that his readers would recognize Poe's "The Raven" by referring to the poem's refrain rather than its title—and in English, no less. See José Bruyr, *Maurice Ravel ou le lyrisme et les sortilèges*, Amour de la musique (Paris: Plon, 1950), 18.

<sup>224</sup> See Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 148-149.

an aesthetic theorist and artistic mentor. Apart from the examples cited above, Ravel mentioned Poe's influence in additional interviews from *The New York Times* and the *San Francisco Examiner*.<sup>225</sup> Most of these discuss Poe in superlative terms: "Philosophy" as the "finest treatise" and "greatest influence," Poe as Ravel's "greatest teacher." There can be little question that by the last third of Ravel's career, the composer considered Poe one of his most important aesthetic influences; whether he had maintained this attitude throughout or merely projected present beliefs on the past remains unclear.

Besides the tales and "The Philosophy of Composition" (which Ravel knew from Baudelaire's translation, "La Genèse d'un poème"), Ravel's knowledge of Poe's works probably encompassed various stories, essays, and perhaps longer works like *Eureka* and *The Narrative of Gordon Arthur Pym*.<sup>226</sup> When discussing the "Frenchness" of "The Raven," Ravel notes that the same characteristic applies to "much else of his [Poe's] verse," suggesting his familiarity with Mallarmé's later translations of the poetry, published in 1888. Of all the Poe works that Ravel knew, however, "The Raven" and "The Philosophy of Composition" offer logical starting points for a study of his compositional process and musical aesthetics. Ravel scholars have turned to these texts repeatedly, and with good reason, as they are the most frequently mentioned in the composer's allusions to Poe.

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<sup>225</sup> The anonymous *Times* interview quotes Ravel, whose "greatest teacher in composition was Edgar Allan Poe." See "Ravel Says Poe Aided Him in Composition," *The New York Times* (6 January 1928); reprint in *Ravel Reader*, 454.

<sup>226</sup> As a boy, however, his knowledge of the poetry would have been limited to Baudelaire's prose translation of "The Raven"; Mallarmé's volume of translated poetry did not appear until 1888.



### ***“The Philosophy of Composition”***

Given the attention paid to it, Ravel’s interpretation of “The Philosophy of Composition” seems straightforward enough. The essay is cited in a substantial proportion of the secondary literature, with one passage recurring often enough to become a commonplace:

It will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the *modus operandi* by which some one of my own works was put together. I select “The Raven” as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition – that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.<sup>227</sup>

Poe’s stated intent encourages the perception of the author as architect, crafting a poem from figurative bricks, mortar, and sweat. Ravel earned his reputation for similar artisan aesthetics through remarks like this one: “These half-formed [musical] ideas are built up automatically; I then range and order them like a mason building a wall. As you see, there’s nothing mysterious or secret in all this.”<sup>228</sup> Joseph Szigeti, who performed Ravel’s Violin Sonata with the composer in a 1928 New York concert, reports Ravel interpreting “Philosophy” in a manner consistent with Poe’s “mathematical problem.” According to Szigeti, Ravel enthusiastically described his “pet theories of conscious cerebration,” which allow the artist to construct a work of art in any medium with mechanical precision.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 14, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 195.

<sup>228</sup> Roger Nichols, ed., *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 55.

<sup>229</sup> Joseph Szigeti, *With Strings Attached*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. (New York: Knopf, 1967), 139.

Paul Dukas, a close friend of Ravel's teacher, Gabriel Fauré, found such literal interpretations of "Philosophy" both limited and naïve. In an 1895 essay on musical originality, Dukas suggested that too many composers simply accept the "paradoxical manner" described in "Philosophy," taking Poe at his word instead of questioning his motives.<sup>230</sup> In implying that "originality is a pure question of will" rather than the product of ineffable factors difficult to quantify, Poe strains the limits of credulity for Dukas. Rather than providing a sequential how-to for creating works of art, Poe's essay "incites the laughter that all brilliant mystification requires from those who, not able to be duped by it, are its inevitable accomplices."<sup>231</sup> Though Dukas probably did not have the twenty-year-old Ravel in mind as an "accomplice," his criticisms resonate decades later when the younger composer professes his belief that Poe actually wrote "The Raven" in the manner suggested in "Philosophy"—and further still, that he produced his own compositions in similar fashion.

Because Ravel's references to Poe typically appear in brief interviews, they tend to articulate the sort of simplistic, earnest reading of "Philosophy" criticized by Dukas. Often the composer mentions "Philosophy" and craftsmanship in the same breath before the interview glibly moves on to other topics (Ravel's latest compositions, his proclivity for smoking, his love of cats, his views on Prohibition). Modern scholars note Ravel's tendency to highlight those passages from "Philosophy" that deal with composition as conundrum—a puzzle to be solved

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<sup>230</sup> Paul Dukas, "La Musique et l'originalité," in *Les Écrits de Paul Dukas sur la musique*, Musique et musiciens (Paris: Société d'éditions françaises et internationales, 1948), 287.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

through patience and effort. This limited focus, however, tends to produce a limiting conclusion: that Ravel found in Poe a kindred spirit whose works taught him the art of calculation and craftsmanship. By linking the composer's artisan aesthetics to Poe, scholars manage to avoid the apparent conflict between Ravel's compositional output (no directly Poe-inspired works) and his claims to Poe's influence and instruction. Yet focusing on the American's defense of craftsmanship obscures Poe's primary artistic objective, which he professes must lie at the center of all creative works: "I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*."<sup>232</sup>

### **Unity of Effect in "Philosophy" and "The Raven"**

Before considering Poe's explanations of effect in "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Raven," it is important to reiterate that many critics and scholars, both in his time and our own, have believed "Philosophy" to be a high-brow hoax. In all of Ravel's extant statements about the essay, however, he never seems to have entertained the notion that it was merely a literary gimmick; in fact, he refers

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<sup>232</sup> Poe, "Philosophy," 194. One of the problems with discussing Ravel's interpretations of Poe is the language barrier: Ravel read French translations, and Baudelaire, faced with the translator's chronic challenge, sometimes abandoned clarity for literalism. His view of Poe as a sympathetic, Byronic figure with whom he shared certain artistic and biographical similarities also infused some of his translations with shades of meaning only marginally supported by the text. I considered using Baudelaire's editions as the primary source for my analysis of Poe's works. Yet such an elliptical approach—translating from French to English a work that had first appeared in English—would produce a wholly new text, a copy of a copy. I have chosen instead to use Poe's English texts in my analyses while providing Baudelaire's translations in the footnotes. In general, Baudelaire's renderings do not change the meaning or interpretation of the passages I cite; if passages deviate significantly from the English in some instances, then I will address these cases as they arise. Baudelaire's French for the quotation cited above is as follows: "Pour moi, la première de toutes les considérations, c'est celle d'un *effet* à produire." Edgar Allan Poe, "La Genèse d'un poème," in *Oeuvres en prose*, trans. Charles Baudelaire (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 984.

specifically to Mallarmé's skepticism when he expresses confidence in Poe's sincerity, "no matter how much Mallarmé claimed that it ["Philosophy"] was nothing but a hoax."<sup>233</sup> Since we seek to understand Ravel's interpretation of "Philosophy," we will assume for the moment that Poe based the essay on earnest, pedagogic premises, using "The Raven" as a companion piece to interpret the precepts that he outlines.

The concept of effect recurs throughout "Philosophy," like a refrain. All other artistic considerations, including craft and calculation, only serve to communicate the writer's chosen effect. When Poe notes the need for brevity rather than expansiveness in literature, he reasons that the duration of the work directly corresponds to the response it produces in the reader, with shorter works more capable of evoking the desired effect: "If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression...."<sup>234</sup> Note also Poe's discussion of variety in the conventional poetic refrain: "I resolved to diversify, and so heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought;..."<sup>235</sup> By maintaining a balance between the constancy of sound and the

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<sup>233</sup> Ravel, "Mes souvenirs d'enfant paresseux," *La petite gironde* (12 July 1931); reprint, *Ravel Reader*, 394.

<sup>234</sup> Poe, "Philosophy," 196. "Si un ouvrage littéraire est trop long pour se laisser lire en une seule séance, il faut nous résigner à nous priver de l'effet prodigieusement important qui résulte de l'unité d'impression;..." See "La Genèse," 986.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 199. "Je résolus de varier l'effet, pour l'augmenter, en restant généralement fidèle à la monotonie du son, pendant que j'altérais continuellement celle de la pensée;..." See "La Genèse," 989.

manipulation of poetic context, Poe claims that he might intensify the effect that is the primary motivating force behind the poem.

The importance of effect appears in Poe's literary criticism as well. One of his most famous works—a review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*—discusses the need for authors to develop artistic foresight, determining a work's definitive character early in the creative process: "Having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect."<sup>236</sup>

In "Philosophy," Poe describes the entire process of writing the poem, attending to versification, setting, choice of characters, and varied poetic tones ranging from the fantastic and ludicrous to the profound. The concept of effect, however, remains his central concern. To illustrate his compositional technique, Poe describes the process of selecting an effect for "The Raven": in this case, he settles on beauty, which is the "sole legitimate province of the poem."<sup>237</sup> Next, he determines the poetic tone that he believes will facilitate contemplation of the beautiful (melancholy, "the most legitimate of all the poetical tones"), followed by a

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<sup>236</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, review of *Twice-Told Tales*, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G.R. Thompson, 572.

<sup>237</sup> Poe, "Philosophy," 197. "...le Beau est le seul domaine légitime de la poésie." See "La Genèse," 987.

specific melancholic subject: death and, more explicitly, the death of a beautiful woman, which is “the most poetical topic in the world” (198, 201).<sup>238</sup>

Anticipating some objections to his characterization of beauty as an effect, Poe suggests that beauty is “not a quality, as is supposed” because it produces an “intense and pure elevation of the soul” in the one contemplating it—as an impression, beauty achieves its identity through the manner in which it is experienced (197).<sup>239</sup> Poe goes on to describe the first appearance of the bird tapping at the window, which the lover misinterprets as a rap at the door for two reasons: to “admit the incidental effect arising from the lover’s throwing open the door, finding all dark,” and to “increase, by prolonging, the reader’s curiosity” (204-5).<sup>240</sup> Both reasons suggest a link between the event in the poem and the effect produced, or the “curiosity” that grows in the reader as she waits for the lover to discover the source of the tapping. At the end of the poem, when the lover loses all sense of wonder and sees the raven only as an “ungainly” and “ominous bird of yore,” Poe seeks to change the reader’s perception as well, in order to “bring the mind into a proper frame for the

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<sup>238</sup> “La mélancolie est donc le plus légitime de tous les tons poétiques.” See “La Genèse,” 988. “Donc, la *mort* d’une *belle femme* est incontestablement le plus poétique sujet du monde...” See “La Genèse,” 990.

<sup>239</sup> “Le plaisir qui est à la fois le plus intense, le plus élevé et le plus pur, ce plaisir-là ne se trouve, je crois, que dans la contemplation du Beau. Quand les hommes parlent de Beauté, ils entendent, non pas précisément une qualité, comme on le suppose, mais une impression:...” See “La Genèse,” 987-88. Here Baudelaire substitutes “effect” for its synonym, “impression,” although he does not do so consistently; usually he uses the French “effet.”

<sup>240</sup> “C’est une idée qui est née de mon désir d’accroître, en la faisant attendre, la curiosité du lecteur, et aussi de placer l’effet incidentel de la porte ouverte toute grande par l’amant, qui ne trouve que ténèbres,...” See “La Genèse,” 994.

*dénouement*” (206).<sup>241</sup> By altering the poetic tone from the fantastic to the profound, Poe suggests that a richer, symbolic meaning, only glimpsed in the final stanza, may be attached to the raven’s presence. When “the reader begins now to regard the Raven as emblematic,”<sup>242</sup> Poe achieves his poetic intention by realizing the effect articulated at the outset: contemplation of the beautiful (208). The raven, representing “*Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*,” acts as an everpresent reminder of Leonore, the beautiful woman taken by death but forever alive in the lover’s memory. Yet Poe, not content to set his melancholic vision inside a hermetic frame, treats the reader’s response as a part of the work, something to be manipulated and actualized.

Although literary scholars have subjected “The Philosophy of Composition” to protracted debate, music scholars tend toward uniform interpretations of the work that elevate craft above other considerations. Precedent for such interpretations emerged in Ravel’s own lifetime, largely through the efforts of Roland-Manuel. In a 1925 article, he begins a discussion of illusion and artifice in Ravel’s music by quoting from Baudelaire’s commentary on “Philosophy”: “Here is a poet who pretends that his poem was composed according to his poetics,” a poet whose greatest enemies are “chance” and “the incomprehensible.”<sup>243</sup> Roland-Manuel notes that

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<sup>241</sup> “Cette évolution de pensée, cette imagination dans l’amant, a pour but d’en préparer une analogue dans le lecteur, d’amener l’esprit dans une situation favorable pour le *dénoûement* [sic],...” See “La Genèse,” Baudelaire, 995.

<sup>242</sup> “Le lecteur commence dès lors à considérer le Corbeau comme emblématique; — mais ce n’est que juste au dernier vers de la dernière strophe qu’il lui est permis de voir distinctement l’intention de faire du Corbeau le symbole du *Souvenir funèbre et éternel*.” See “La Genèse,” 997.

<sup>243</sup> “Voici un poète qui prétend que son poème a été composé d’après sa poétique.” Roland-Manuel, “Maurice Ravel ou l’esthétique de l’imposture,” *La Revue musicale* 6, no. 6 (April 1925): 16.

Baudelaire's caution is instructive, since "Philosophy" comes across to many as nothing but a paradox. When turning to Ravel, however, he suggests that a personal acquaintance with the composer is scarcely necessary to become "convinced that the procedures of this musician, his technique, and his art are realized entirely through determined investigation and the distrust of inspiration."<sup>244</sup> More recently, Ravel's interest in Poe has been attributed to his preoccupation with musical craft and evocative Gothic imagery, like bells and clocks.<sup>245</sup>

Ravel, an avid and perspicacious reader, had been consuming Poe's words in translation since his early teenage years, if not before. Viñes's journal shows the degree to which literature permeated both the creative and quotidian activities of Ravel; the two exchanged, discussed, or read together works by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Maeterlinck, Huysmans, Aloysius Bertrand, Jean Lombard, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Montesquiou, Joncières, and Henri de Régnier.<sup>246</sup> In describing his afternoons with Ravel, Viñes noted that they often spent the day discussing literature; one typical entry says, "We played the piano, played [games], . . . and we read."<sup>247</sup> Another entry showed Ravel leading Viñes during one of their walks to a church (Saint-

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 17. "Il n'est pas nécessaire de connaître personnellement Maurice Ravel, ni d'avoir pénétré fort avant dans l'intrinsèque de sa pensée pour se convaincre que les procédés de ce musicien, sa technique et son art tout entier impliquent une recherche volontaire et la défiance de l'inspiration."

<sup>245</sup> See, for example, Barbara L. Kelly, "History and Homage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16; Mawer, "Musical Objects and Machines," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, 50; Mawer, "Balanchine's 'La Valse,'" 106.

<sup>246</sup> See Viñes, "Le journal inédit," 186, 188-189, 192, 195. Viñes also mentions Sabatier among the authors they discussed—perhaps Paul or Auguste Sabatier, both French theological historians with books in print during the years in question.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 185, 189.



Séverin) described in a work by Huysmans.<sup>248</sup> The two often traded books that they enjoyed and returned to old favorites to re-read them.

In describing the relationship between music and its sister disciplines, Ravel debunked familial metaphors by claiming that the arts are not related, but rather one and the same: “For me, there are not several arts, but only one: music, painting, and literature differ only in their means of expression. Thus, there aren’t different kinds of artists, but simply different kinds of specialists.”<sup>249</sup> The composer goes on to suggest that as an artist, he approaches literature from a proficient’s perspective: “As for me I was certainly born a musician; but if I do not write, it’s because of lack of training: I realize, for example, that I read in a thoroughly professional manner, as if I were a writer.”<sup>250</sup> Despite this deficit in training, Ravel’s literary pretensions seeped into even the most mundane activities; for example, Jean Roy points out a letter in which Ravel wrote out the address in verse, imitating the fanciful quatrains with which Mallarmé addressed his letters.<sup>251</sup>

If Ravel interpreted “The Philosophy of Composition” as a practical treatise that informed his own artistic process, chances are he read it carefully; if the reading patterns of his youth held true for even part of his life adult life, he probably read it many times. A mind as discerning as his likely would have recognized that Poe

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>249</sup> Ravel, “Mes souvenirs,” reprint and translation, *Ravel Reader*, 393.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> “Ravel imite les quatrains en forme d’adresse postale auxquels excellait Mallarmé. Il écrit donc le sien sur l’enveloppe, prenant soin cependant de souligner le nom de son destinataire et son adresse.” See Jean Roy, ed., *Lettres à Roland Manuel et sa famille* (Paris: Calligrammes, 1986), 132n.

discussed craft chiefly as a vehicle for more important material: the artist's chosen effect. Ravel's claims to literary expertise via the mutually reciprocal relationship of the arts supports an interpretation of "Philosophy" that expands upon his statements to the press by assigning a secondary role to technique.

### **Ravel's Effect: Singularity, Surprise, and Shock**

In a statement given in 1928, Ravel's description of his compositional aspirations introduces a variation on Poe's discussion of technique and effect: "My objective, therefore, is technical perfection. . . . Art, no doubt, has other *effects*, but the artist, in my opinion, should have no other aim."<sup>252</sup> Ravel creates a dichotomy between the technical goals of a composer (perfection) and the resulting work of art (its effect), which acts upon, and interacts with, the listener. In reading "Philosophy," Ravel may have seen a similar division between the compositional process (ordering and calculation) and the effect of the completed work once it leaves the composer's hands. Effect is the end product of all art, while technique is the vehicle that enables art to exist. When Ravel discussed "Philosophy" in a journalistic context, it was probably easier to focus on technique, which can be analyzed and quantified to some extent, than effect—something Ravel considered an inexpressible quality of music.

Two instances in which Ravel discussed Poe in a public or semi-public forum speak to the composer's distinction between technique and effect. In a 1928

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<sup>252</sup> Emphasis Ravel's. Roland-Manuel, "Lettres de Maurice Ravel et documents inédits," *Revue de musicologie* 38 (July 1956): 53; reprint and translation in *Ravel Reader*, 38. "L'art, sans doute, a d'autres *effets*, mais l'artiste, à mon gré, ne doit pas avoir d'autre but."

interview for the *San Francisco Examiner*, Ravel claims that he wrote the Violin Sonata in much the same manner that Poe claimed to have written “The Raven”: “It upsets the peculiar superstition about inspiration, I know. Don’t they know that, of its very nature, music is artificial? Nature gives us melodic effects, but never a melody.”<sup>253</sup> Here Ravel suggests, in characteristic fashion, that while the term “nature” may suggest instinct and ease, the “nature” of music is artifice, the product of intellectual labor.

The composer elaborates further on the dichotomy in his 1928 address at the Rice Institute in Houston:

On the initial performance of a new musical composition, the first impression of the public is generally one of reaction to the more superficial elements of its music, that is to say, to its external manifestations rather than to its inner content. The listener is impressed by some unimportant peculiarity in the medium of expression, and yet the idiom of expression, even if considered in its completeness, is only the means and not the end in itself, and often it is not until years after, when the means of expression have finally surrendered their secrets, that the real inner emotion of the music becomes apparent to the listener.<sup>254</sup>

It is curious to witness Ravel speaking about the emotional content of a work after having once claimed that sincerity is a liability for the artist, whose craft is one of illusion over expression. If Ravel indeed considered falsehood one of the most essential attributes an artist can possess, then his remarks concerning emotion in

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<sup>253</sup> Redfern Mason, “Ravel Here to Conduct Symphony,” *San Francisco Examiner* (1 February 1928): 6.

<sup>254</sup> Maurice Ravel, “Contemporary Music,” *Rice Institute Pamphlet* 15 (April 1928); reprint, *Ravel Reader*, 42. The provenance of this document remains murky; Ravel delivered the lecture in French but only an English translation has survived. Unlike “Mes souvenirs,” the Rice Institute lecture has been accepted by Ravel scholars with little equivocation. I have not found sufficient grounds to doubt its authenticity.

music might be reconciled and clarified by evoking a Kantian analogy. Ravel's "external manifestations" and "medium[s] of expression" refer to a composer's stylistic vocabulary, which serves as the means of transmitting the music's effect or "inner content"—in this case, emotion. By assigning Kant's opposing faculties to the compositional process and the work itself, the intellectual may be distinguished from the sensual, though neither can exist without the other.

Later in the same address, Ravel considers the aesthetics of Poe and Mallarmé, interpreting the latter's works through the correspondence between craft and effect:

The aesthetic of Edgar Allan Poe, your great American, has been of singular importance to me, and also the immaterial poetry of Mallarmé—unbounded visions, yet precise in design, enclosed in a mystery of somber abstraction—an art where all the elements are so intimately bound up together that one cannot analyze, but only sense, its effect.<sup>255</sup>

What Ravel finds appealing about Mallarmé is the way in which he incorporates both the technical and the ineffable, the precision of his designs and the "mystery" and "unbounded visions" of his ideas. Mallarmé's work exhibits something beyond the mere balance between craft and effect, instead achieving a seamless synthesis of both elements that resists analysis—much like the "unity of impression" described in "Philosophy."

On multiple occasions, Ravel expressed an interest in guiding or manipulating the response of audiences. Though he admired Mozart more than perhaps any other

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

composer, his interest in the perceptions and reactions of listeners suggests a strong affinity with Haydn.<sup>256</sup> Like the composer of the “Surprise” and “Farewell” symphonies, Ravel exhibits a desire to provoke, tease, or startle audiences. His 1913 letter to the Board of the Société Musicale Indépendante describes a “stupendous project for a scandalous concert” that would include *Pierrot lunaire*, *Three Japanese Lyrics*, and two movements from his own *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*.<sup>257</sup> Ravel notes that the Schoenberg and Stravinsky works “will make the audience howl” while the Mallarmé songs “will calm them down, and the people will go out whistling tunes....”<sup>258</sup> Another letter about a number from *L’Enfant et les les sortilèges*, addressed to librettist Colette, shows a similar desire to provoke, though this time with one of his own works: “What would you think of the cup and teapot, in old black We[d]gwood, singing a ragtime? I must confess that the idea of having negroes singing a ragtime at our National Academy fills me with great joy....”<sup>259</sup> Unlike the letter to the S.M.I., which proposed a concert program for mostly completed works, Ravel was writing to Colette during the early drafting stages of *L’Enfant*, which he

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<sup>256</sup> Ravel’s appreciation for Haydn is apparent in his *Menuet sur le nom d’Haydn*, commissioned for a special edition of *La Revue musicale de la S.I.M.* to mark the centenary of the composer’s death. See Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 59.

<sup>257</sup> Ravel to the S.M.I. Board, care of Madame Alfredo Casella, Clarens-Montreux, 2 April 1913, in *Ravel Reader*, 135.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid. “Projet mirifique d’un concert scandaleux....(a) *Pierrot lunaire*: Schönberg (21 pièces: 40 mn). (b) *Mélodies japonaises*: Stravinsky (4 pièces: 10 mn). (c) 2 poésies de S. Mallarmé: Maurice Ravel (environ 10 mn). (a) et (b) feront gueuler; (c) calmera et les gens sortiront en fredonnant des airs.” See *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 128.

<sup>259</sup> Ravel to Colette de Jouvenel, Mégève, 27 February 1919, in *Ravel Reader*, 188. “Que penseriez-vous de la tasse et de la théière, en vieux We[d]gwood—noir—, chantant un ragtime? J’avoue que l’idée me transporte de faire chanter un ragtime par deux nègres à l’Académie Nationale de Musique.” See *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 172.

finished in 1925; the cup-and-teapot number eventually did make it into the opera. Ravel's cheeky suggestion to tweak the stuffy audiences at the Paris Opéra suggests that he may have favored one compositional choice over another by calculating the audience's projected response.

Long before the composition of *L'Enfant*, when Ravel was first trying to capture the elusive Prix de Rome, he expressed to a friend misgivings about his competition cantata: "I had patiently elaborated a scene from *Callirhoé*, and was strongly counting on its effect: the music was rather dull, prudently passionate, and its degree of boldness was accessible to those gentlemen of the Institute."<sup>260</sup> Like his bifurcation of artistic objectives and effects, Ravel distinguishes between the music—which in his view was prosaic rather than provocative—and its intended impact on the judging panel. Although Ravel was an astute and sensitive critic when discussing both his own music and that of others, he sometimes left details to the imagination; in this case, he did not elaborate on the sort of effect he had in mind, or how he planned to achieve it.

### **Paved with Good Intentions**

In assessing Ravel's statements about Poe and effect, inevitable hazards arise when seeking insight about a composer's works in his words. Trends in art criticism over the past half-century have attempted to separate the art object from the artist and the

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<sup>260</sup> Ravel to Dumitru Kiriak, 21 March 1900, in *Ravel Reader*, 57. "J'avais élaboré patiemment, pour les examens de janvier, une scène de *Callirhoé*, sur l'effet de laquelle je comptais beaucoup: musique assez grise, prudemment passionnée, et d'une hardiesse accessible à ces messieurs de l'Institut." See *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 63-64.

process that produced it, thus divorcing the work from any historical or contextual baggage that critics or artists themselves have attached to it. Monroe Beardsley argues that the intentions of the artist may still be relevant if they can be corroborated within the work itself: “Where internal and external evidence go hand in hand—for example, the painter writes in an exhibition catalogue that his painting is balance in a precise and complicated way, and we go to the painting see that it *is* so balanced—there is no problem.”<sup>261</sup> The moment internal and external evidence conflict, however, critics must extract the work from a context inaccurately or falsely invoked by the artist. Beardsley acknowledges the difficulty in evaluating the art object separately, particularly when the viewer is already aware of statements the artist has made about the work. Yet because the intentions of the artist can never be fully comprehended—and because some artists publicize a poetics *after* creating a work, as Ravel arguably did—the role of intention is too fraught with perceptual ambivalence to pursue it.

Once a work is considered an independent object that transcends cultural and historical associations, the modern viewer may create meaning without trying to recover historical consciousness. I have no desire to discredit such an approach here. Yet in the spirit of Gadamer, who argued that “the important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias,” I offer an analytical approach that attempts to thread the needle, navigating the space between objectivist and relativist models by situating the work

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<sup>261</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 20.

of art both within and beyond the metaphorical fourth wall. Gadamer notes that successive levels of synthesis bind the inner mechanisms of the work to one another, which in turn connect it to the artist's output and beyond: "As the single word belongs in the total context of the sentence, so the single text belongs in the total context of a writer's work, and the latter in the whole of the literary genre or of literature."<sup>262</sup> The work simultaneously enjoys a clandestine existence as a part of the artist's interior activity, for "as a manifestation of a creative moment, [it] belongs to the whole of its author's inner life."<sup>263</sup>

My interpretation of Ravel's remarks about Poe approach the composer's "inner life," suggesting ways in which the American may have served as a sustaining aesthetic influence throughout Ravel's career. Even with the composer's admitted interest in the effect of a work in performance, there are no extant statements to my knowledge in which Ravel expressed that this interest derived from his reading of Poe. Ravel's statements do imply, however, that he distinguished between craft and effect while noting a relationship between them; a few go further to indicate the nature of that relationship—hierarchical rather than symbiotic, with craft serving effect.

Establishing Ravel's understanding of effect is critical both to the nature of the grotesque and the philosophical underpinnings of my analytical approach. As an aesthetic phenomenon, the grotesque cannot be characterized within its frame, for it

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<sup>262</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2002), 291.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.



gains identity only through the response it evokes in a viewer. No discussion of the grotesque would be possible, then, without considering the reception of Ravel's works by contemporary audiences, whose response suggests its presence. Similarly, Ravel's grotesque mediates between effect, Poe, and *fin-de-siècle* cultural constructions of "grotesque," which include both the term's vernacular and philosophical contexts. Thus far, we have examined each contribution to the grotesque in relative isolation, focusing on the composition of the threads rather than their interdependence in the fabric. The next chapter will complete Gadamer's hermeneutic circle by developing a theory of Ravel's grotesque, drawing together the concept of effect, the grotesque in Poe, and *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics in an analysis of Ravel's student work, *Sérénade grotesque*.

**CHAPTER V**  
**CASE STUDY: EXPECTATION AND TRANGRESSION IN**  
***SÉRÉNADE GROTESQUE***

When Ravel read Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström" and "MS. Found in a Bottle," his sketches of scenes from both tales evidence their powerful effect on the young composer's imagination. The French notion of the grotesque emphasizes the importance of emotional or physiological response; Baudelaire and Gautier made specific reference to reactions produced by the grotesque, and the "grotesque" engravings of Callot often included spectators within the work itself, drawing attention to the act of viewing and responding. In accepting the grotesque as a species of effect, strategies must be developed for recognizing its musical manifestations. Two issues are of particular concern: the grotesque as the transgression of boundaries, and the grotesque as an effect exercised upon an audience.

**Approaching the Limits**

Boundaries of all sorts surround us in daily life. As children furnished with crayons and coloring books, we were admonished to color within the lines, a directive that

distinguishes between figure and ground, object and blank space. Other spatial boundaries include crosswalks, doors, fences, and geographic borders, which may be marked by physical barriers or lines conceptually drawn on a map. Interpersonal boundaries, which are culturally acquired and usually sensed rather than seen, determine the types and qualities of social interactions between different categories of people: parent and child, friends, co-workers, employer and subordinate. At times, a single boundary may manifest itself in multiple ways; the phrase “personal space,” for example, designates a conceptual spatial boundary that facilitates interpersonal relationships.

With boundaries come expectations. The child instructed to color within the lines is expected to follow this instruction, just as two strangers striking up a conversation expect one another to maintain an unspoken, socially designated distance as they converse. A citizen is expected to remain within her country’s geographical borders until she acquires clearance to leave. When a boundary is breached, the type of reaction that results depends largely on the expectations of those affected. Consider, for example, the following two scenarios:

Scenario A: Dorothy, a government worker in the Emerald City, wishes to leave Oz to be with her daughter who lives in Kansas. After supplying documentation of her identity and filing the necessary paperwork, she receives a passport from Oz and a worker’s permit from the state of Kansas. Dorothy enters Kansas at an immigrant portal and successfully reunites with her daughter in Topeka.

Scenario B: Dorothy, a government worker in the Emerald City, wishes to leave Oz to be with her daughter in Kansas. Under cover of night, she steals across the Kansas border and hitchhikes to her daughter's home. When Dorothy does not show up to work the next day, Oz officials become concerned and initiate an investigation to locate her. The head of Oz's covert operations department discovers Dorothy in Kansas and, concerned that she is engaging in espionage, plots a dangerous recovery mission. After a twelve-hour stand-off, Dorothy surrenders to officials, who take her into custody and prosecute her for high treason.

Dorothy breached a geographical and political boundary in both scenarios, but the consequences of her actions were dramatically different. In Scenario A, both the Oz and Kansas governments were expecting Dorothy to cross the border, and Dorothy did so during daylight hours at a site designated specifically for immigrant passage. In Scenario B, it was not so much the transgressed boundary that caused the Oz officials consternation, but rather the series of violated expectations: none of them had anticipated that Dorothy, a loyal government worker, would steal across the border in the middle of the night and, in the process, provoke an international incident.

In approaching the grotesque in Ravel's music, it is critical to consider the impact of expectation on transgressed boundaries, for expectation changes the reactive quality of the transgression itself.

## Temporality, Expectation, and Musical Meaning

Though first published over fifty years ago, Leonard Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* remains a model for studies in music cognition and the psychology of music. In the ensuing years, technological advancements have allowed researchers to understand the brain's musical functions with increasing precision. Yet rather than outdating Meyer's work, current scholarship has shown it to be more relevant than ever, as researchers continue to confirm, challenge, disprove, or further refine Meyer's network of theories. Even with recent attempts to update theories of musical expectation,<sup>264</sup> his work remains timely and convincing. While Meyer grounds his theories in psychological research and supports them with specific musical examples, his approach is essentially aesthetic and experiential—universal enough that it may be applied to a variety of repertoires, cultural traditions, and philosophical orientations.

Meyer's theories about perception and expectation emerged from a desire to understand the nature of musical meaning and communication. As a stimulus, music evokes specific tendencies in the mind which must then be interpreted as emotion or affect, although the relationship between tendencies and emotions is not strictly causal. Meyer notes that while the emotional reaction to a stimulus is

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<sup>264</sup> Among the best-known of these works is Eugene Narmour's pair of studies on melody; see Narmour, *Analysis and Cognition of Basic Melodic Structures: The Implication-Realization Model* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and *The Analysis and Cognition of Melodic Complexity: The Implication-Realization Model* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Also see more recent work by David Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

“undifferentiated,” the “affective experience” allows emotion to be interpreted according to its musical, cultural, or aesthetic context, and thus assigned meaning.<sup>265</sup>

The affective experience of music may be studied from an “objective” viewpoint by examining the tendencies produced in listeners when presented with musical phenomena that involve ambiguity, delay, or deviation from an expected course: “The customary or expected progression of sounds can be considered as a norm, which from a stylistic point of view it is; and alteration in the expected progression can be considered as a deviation. Hence deviations can be regarded as emotional or affective stimuli” (32).<sup>266</sup> If a tendency is allowed to resolve without being inhibited or delayed, then the listener presumably would not experience an emotional response. The expected course depends upon the “sound successions common to a culture, style, or a particular work”; listeners, once familiar with these patterns, may then recognize adherence to or deviation from them.

Meyer claims that establishing stylistic norms for a specific work or musical tradition allows the scholar to examine the music “without continual and explicit reference to the responses of the listener or critic” (32). At this juncture Meyer, usually so attentive to the temporal, social, and communal experience of music, adopts the sort of universalist perspective that he criticizes elsewhere.<sup>267</sup> Musical

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<sup>265</sup> Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 19.

<sup>266</sup> Meyer places the word “objective” in quotations as well, which acknowledges that all acts of viewing, hearing, and scholarship involve personal, subjective points of view.

<sup>267</sup> His more recent study of musical style considers the culturally conditioned “hierarchy of constraints” that motivates composers to favor certain compositional choices over others. Yet his focus remains on the interaction between the work and the listener, with less attention paid to

experiences in a concert hall involve variables beyond the individual listener's engagement with sound. As Meyer notes, even the listener's expectations that she will have an emotional experience predispose her to having one regardless of the type or quality of the performance (77).<sup>268</sup>

Taking this idea further, the listener's experience may also be affected by other concertgoers: the communal response of the audience, or the group of friends with whom she attends the concert who make comments about the music between movements. Music critics prepare the minds of the audience by offering previews of upcoming concerts; similarly, criticism of a work's premiere may change the predisposition of all subsequent audiences, generating responses that may have little to do with the performance itself. It will be helpful to modify Meyer's theory slightly to admit the perspectives of contemporary critics who helped maintain Ravel's artistic persona, and whose censure or advocacy often swayed the public's response to new works.

Experiencing music is a process involving the continual creation and modification of expectations. Once acclimated to the aesthetic, cultural, and stylistic context of the music, listeners assign meaning to what they hear in the moment and make predictions about what they are going to hear next. Meyer is careful to note

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performance space or critical commentary. See Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>268</sup> This expectation is a type of "preparatory set," which consists of "mental attitudes and bodily tensions" that the listener develops by responding to learned verbal or visual cues.

that the predictions formed, while based on musical phenomena, are intellectual processes, for a line of music has no inertia or meaning of its own:

Of course, a line or motion does not perpetuate itself. It is only a series of lifeless stimuli. What happens is that the perception of a line or motion initiates a mental process, and it is this mental process which, following the mental line of least resistance, tends to be perpetuated and continued (92).

Listeners form expectations based on stylistic probabilities that give rise to numerous possibilities, some more likely than others; they then assess these possibilities and develop expectations based upon them. At the same time, they create hypothetical meanings for the music, which often change throughout the course of a work (37). Once a listener understands “the relationship between the antecedent and consequent,” then she creates an evident meaning that appreciates the import of prior musical events and integrates past meanings with present ones. Meyer terms this process a “chain of causality” in which a stimulus becomes realized through a consequent, which in turn becomes another stimulus. The construction of meaning is flexible, temporal, and capable of existing on multiple architectonic levels, with the evident meaning responding not only to the stimulus that immediately preceded it, but also to all previous stimulus-consequent relationships.

Closely related to Meyer’s work is the comparatively recent cognitive theory of emotion developed by George Mandler and adopted by Jay Dowling and Dane Harwood. The theory, which addresses the physiological basis for assigned meanings and emotions, suggests that “perceptual-motor schemata” govern the creation of expectations, which in turn cause listeners to draft a schema regarding what they



expect to hear next. When a plan is interrupted, then “biological arousal” indicates that the plan has gone awry; this, in turn, prompts the listener to seek interpretation, or “search for meaning.”<sup>269</sup> Mandler found that the arousal of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) requires contextual direction or interpretation before an appropriate emotion may be identified and experienced. Dowling and Harwood note a 1962 experiment in which subjects were given an ANS-arousing drug without their knowledge as researchers suggested a context (joy or anger) for their feelings: “Subjects tended to experience the emotion suggested by the context, leading to the conclusion that ANS arousal itself is relatively contentless and that content is provided by subsequent cognitive analysis.”<sup>270</sup> A number of researchers have found that ANS arousal is responsible for emotional responses to music, no matter its style or tempo, furthering supports Meyer’s notion that listeners assign meaning and experience emotion based on a work’s context.

Different tendencies give rise to different expectations. Listeners typically to compare the music they hear with ideal types and create expectations based on previous experience:

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<sup>269</sup> W. Jay Dowling and Dane Harwood, *Music Cognition* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1986), 214. “Biological arousal” refers to physiological responses in the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which is responsible for automatic functions in the body, including breathing, digestion, and the heartbeat. The ANS is divided into the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, with the former more involved in emotional response. See Dowling and Harwood, 215.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

As we listen to a particular fugue we compare its special progress with the progress expected on the basis of our normalized concept of a fugue. Those progressions which seem irregular and unexpected relative to the generalized fugue of our imagination are then the deviants (the delays and resistances) which arouse the affective aesthetic response.<sup>271</sup>

To consider the types of affects that different tendencies might evoke, Meyer discusses thought processes influencing organization, memory, and symmetry. The Western mind strives for clarity, organizing patterns in a regular, symmetrical manner (a phenomenon known as the law of *Prägnanz*); memory systems similarly rearrange irregular and incomplete patterns in order to achieve regularity and completeness (87, 89). If the memory is “unable to ‘straighten out,’ complete, or make symmetrical” certain irregular or incomplete patterns, then it will typically forget them (89).

Although Meyer elaborates on laws applying to specific types of musical motion, the general precepts he outlines concerning the relationship between expectation and affect are most important here. If the nature of a musical event seems indeterminate, perhaps because musical patterns or figure/ground relationships are obscure, then “doubt and uncertainty as to the general significance, function, and outcome of the passage will result” (26). Repetition “never exists psychologically,” for the reappearance of a musical pattern creates in the listener different and more explicit expectations than its first appearance (49).

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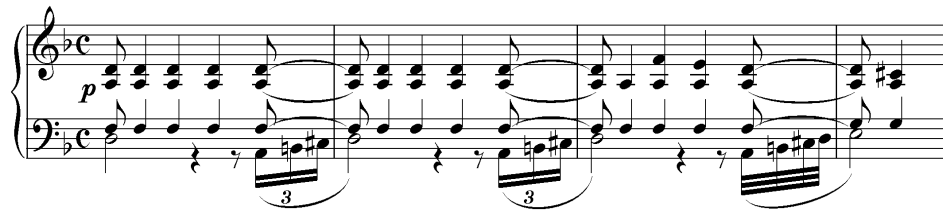
<sup>271</sup> Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning*, 58. For Meyer, ideal types are not rigid categories, since they respond to a listener’s changing expectations of those types. In fact, it is this continual process of revision that also allows us to enjoy the same work many times: “For as the norm with which we compare the particular has changed since a previous hearing, the expectations which are entertained on the basis of the norm will also have changed, and the new hearing will involve new perceptions and new meanings.”

What remains implicit in Meyer's discussion of expectation is the notion that cultural learning, which familiarizes listeners with the conventions of certain styles and genres, also inculcates attitudes about musical boundaries as well. The reason that listeners experience the deceptive cadence, for example, as a surprise or delay is not only because they understand Western harmonic practices, but also because the expected resolution acts as a boundary: a phrase ending marked by a stable, closed cadence.

In Western music, boundaries may parallel those experienced in life: some are purely visual or spatial (a barline, for example, or two sections of an orchestra separated by an aisle), some conceptual (an introduction), and some a combination of the two (an introduction marked by a double barline and a grand pause). Yet the boundaries that accompany musical expectation are often more fluid than those encountered in other contexts. The arrival at the retransition of a sonata form may be the subject of continual debate, just as the finality of certain cadences assumed to be "closed" may be questioned.

Meyer's analysis of Mozart's Piano Concerto in D Minor reveals the ways in which a listener might alter expectations through hypothetical and evident meanings by attending to musical boundaries. The opening of the first movement, which features a series of syncopated harmonies over a rhythmically repetitive baseline, forms the basis of the listener's hypothetical meaning: the material is either introductory or accompanimental, generating the expectation that a melody will soon appear (Example 5.1).

**Example 5.1. Meyer's reduction of Mozart's Piano Concerto in D minor, first movement, mm. 1-4.**



As the passage grows “more differentiated,” however, the hypothetical meaning gives way to an evident meaning that integrates past assumptions into present understanding: the passage is, in fact, primary thematic material (184). The listener’s expectations of this passage rely on a knowledge of musical boundaries that distinguish melody from accompaniment and introductory material from primary themes. While the process of differentiation may be partially responsible for listener’s changing perceptions, Mozart’s obscuring of formal and textural boundaries invites listeners to create different meanings at successive temporal points in the work.

**Stylistic Norms in the French Serenade**

*Sérénade grotesque* dates from about 1893, when Ravel was studying piano with Charles de Bériot and harmony with Émile Pessard. Thought by Roland-Manuel to be lost, the work was recovered by Arbie Orenstein and published posthumously in 1975. In the autograph, its title is simply *Sérénade*; “grotesque” was added as early as 1914, although the chronology of this addition is unclear. Orenstein notes that

Ravel informed Roland-Manuel of the work's full title and date in 1928.<sup>272</sup> In fact, the latter knew the work as *Sérénade grotesque* by 1914, the year he published *Maurice Ravel et son oeuvre*; in this slender biography, he lists *Sérénade grotesque* among two other works, *Ballade de la reine morte d'aimer* and *Un Grand sommeil noir*, all of which he dates to 1894. Without a complete title on the autograph, there remains the question of whether the “grotesque” came from Ravel or was added at Roland-Manuel's suggestion.<sup>273</sup>

It seems most likely that Ravel made the addition to the title. He may have decided years after the work's composition that the work merited additional description; his propensity to reinterpret past works for different musical media—transcriptions of piano works for orchestra or concert works excerpted from ballets—suggests that he may have done the same with *Sérénade*. As one of Ravel's earliest works, *Sérénade* may serve as a case study, revealing aspects of the grotesque that are developed later in his career.

Orenstein, whose description of *Sérénade* takes its cue from Ravel's “Autobiographical Sketch,” claims that “the general mood of the serenade is that of grotesque irony” influenced by Emmanuel Chabrier's *Bourrée fantasque* (1891).<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 140. The sketch to which Orenstein refers was produced by Roland-Manuel based on Ravel's dictations; originally intended for the Aeolian company, it was not edited or printed until after the composer's death. Roland-Manuel explains the work's genesis in “Une Esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel,” *La Revue musicale* (December 1938): 17-23.

<sup>273</sup> Since its publication in 1975, *Sérénade grotesque* has been known by its complete title in scores, recordings, and works lists despite its problematic attribution.

<sup>274</sup> See Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 140, and Ravel, “Autobiographical Sketch,” in *Ravel Reader*, 30.

Few Ravel biographers mention *Sérénade*, but those who do tend to focus, like Orenstein, on the work's titular "grotesque."<sup>275</sup> The "serenade" in the title seems scarcely worthy of interrogation, for there were an abundance of such works in nineteenth-century France, including *mélodies* and opera arias.<sup>276</sup> What sets Ravel's serenade apart from its contemporaries is what it lacks: a voice and a text.

Though Ravel may have encountered piano serenades by Pauline Garcia-Viardot and Cécile Chaminade, the model for such a work need not have come from France. Instrumental serenades were written by Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart; though Ravel cared little for the German Romantics, he greatly admired Mozart, whose music was prominently featured in the Conservatoire curriculum. Yet the serenades written by Austro-German composers—typically for orchestral or chamber ensembles—bear far less resemblance to Ravel's than the similarly titled, contemporaneous French vocal works. Outside of France, Albéniz and Granados wrote serenades for solo piano,<sup>277</sup> and though Ravel may have known these works, they differ considerably in style from his own.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> H.H. Stuckenschmidt finds that *Sérénade*'s title reflects "intellectual dandyism and the aloofness of his literary taste," while Burnett James notes the "oblique and often satiric quality" in Chabrier's music that influenced Ravel. See Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variations on His Life and Work*, trans. Samuel R. Rosenbaum (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1968), 22; James, *Ravel: His Life and Times* (New York: Hippocrene, 1983), 20.

<sup>276</sup> Fauré, Massenet, Chabrier, and Chausson all wrote vocal serenades that will be discussed below; operatic serenades included Gounod's "Vous qui faites l'endormie—Sérénade" from *Faust* and Bizet's "Sérénade" from *La Jolie fille de Perth*.

<sup>277</sup> Serenades by these composers may be found in Albéniz's *Suite española* (1886), *España* (1890), and *Sérénade espagnole* (1890), as well as Granados's *Goyescas*, book 2 (1913).

<sup>278</sup> Viñes may have introduced Ravel to the music of Albéniz and Granados; alternatively, it may have been Spanish pianist Santiago Riéra, with whom Ravel studied for about two years after his dismissal

French vocal serenades that predate Ravel's *Sérénade* by about twenty years or less include Chabrier's "Sérénade" (1862), Fauré's *Sérénade toscane* (1879), and Chausson's "Sérénade italienne" (1880) and "Sérénade" (1887).<sup>279</sup> Despite differences in musical style and aesthetic approach, these serenades display certain similarities in tempo, meter, and dynamic levels, summarized in Table 5.1.

Three of the four serenades are in triple or compound meter (see Example 5.2, below), with the piano often articulating a lilting trochee pattern; "Sérénade italienne," whose text describes a boat on the water, employs arpeggiated triads in the right hand to achieve a rocking effect. Vocal phrases tend to be simple and only two or three bars in length, though longer phrases may be found in the Chausson "Sérénade." The texts of the Chausson and Chabrier songs reflect a male lover's attempt to woo his beloved through hyperbolic metaphors and picturesque settings; Fauré's *mélodie*, cast in the mold of a troubadour *canso*, portrays a tale of unrequited love. Dreams, sleep, and the imagery of night predominate in serenade poetry, and the dynamic levels of the music reflect this somnolent atmosphere; most of the *mélodies* begin *piano* and remain within a limited dynamic range throughout. Accompaniments vary considerably from contrapuntal (Chausson's "Sérénade") to purely homophonic and homorhythmic (Chabrier's), with legato arpeggiated sections and alternating right- and left-hand figures appearing occasionally.

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from Bériot's piano class in 1895. If Ravel learned of this repertoire through Riéra, he would not have been aware of it at the time he wrote *Sérénade*.

<sup>279</sup> Chabrier's "Sérénade" belonged to a collection of nine songs that were first published in 1895. Chausson's "Sérénade italienne" came from *Sept mélodies*, written from 1879-82; his "Sérénade" appeared in *Quatre mélodies* (first published without a date).

**Table 5.1. Characteristics of vocal serenades by Chabrier, Chausson, and Fauré.**

<i>Title</i>	<i>Composer</i>	<i>Meter</i>	<i>Tempo</i>	<i>Opening Dynamic</i>
Sérénade	Chabrier	6/8	<i>Andantino cantabile</i>	Not indicated
Sérénade	Chausson	3/4	<i>Modéré</i>	<i>piano</i>
Sérénade italienne	Chausson	3/2	<i>Moderato</i>	<i>piano</i>
Sérénade toscane	Fauré	9/8	<i>Andante con moto quasi Allegretto</i>	<i>piano</i>

**Example 5.2. Excerpts from opening piano accompaniments of serenades by Chabrier, Fauré, and Chausson.**

Chabrier, *Sérénade*, mm. 1-3.



Fauré, *Sérénade toscane*, mm. 2-4.



Chausson, *Sérénade*, mm. 1-4.



Chausson, *Sérénade italienne*, mm. 1-2.





Apart from these French vocal serenades are three solo piano works that date from the 1880s: Alexander Borodin's "Serenade" (from *Petite Suite*, 1885), Viardot's *Gavotte et Sérénade* (1885), and Cécile Chaminade's *Sérénade*, Op. 29 (1884); Table 5.2 compares the tempo, dynamics, and rhythmic figurations of these works. Borodin's "Serenade" opens with toccata-inspired chords that alternate between the right and left hands in a repeated rhythmic pattern before shifting to the serenade melody, marked *amoroso ed espressivo il canto* with accents on the second and fifth beats. The work develops by alternating between the first serenade melody and a second, more ornamented one, returning at the end to the toccata figuration.

Viardot's *Sérénade*, also in 6/8 time with a recurrent rhythmic ostinato, combines marcato articulations with harmonies, figurations, and hemiola rhythms reminiscent of Spanish guitar music. Improvisatory flourishes distinguish sections of the work, which unfold through elaborations on the primary theme before arriving at a new melody and impressionistic texture, created from oscillating sixths and thirds in the right hand. Chaminade's *Sérénade*—in the same *moderato* tempo as Viardot's—employs simple quarter-note arpeggiations and chords in the left hand to support a vocally-inspired melody in the right. While the virtuoso flair in Viardot's serenade marks it as a showpiece, Chaminade's work seems better suited to private performance in homes and salons. Both works combine the conventional piano accompaniment of a vocal serenade with a melody whose range, contours, and rhythms make it highly singable.

**Table 5.2. Characteristics of piano serenades by Borodin, Viardot, and Chaminade.**

<i>Title</i>	<i>Composer</i>	<i>Meter</i>	<i>Tempo</i>	<i>Opening Dynamic</i>
Serenade	Borodin	6/8	<i>Allegretto</i>	<i>pianissimo</i>
Sérénade	Viardot	6/8	<i>Moderato</i>	<i>piano</i>
Sérénade	Chaminade	3/4	<i>Moderato</i>	<i>pianississimo</i> (una corda)

It is unclear whether Ravel would have known the Chaminade serenade, though there is some evidence that he could have seen or played both Borodin's and Viardot's works. Ricardo Viñes records in his journal that he and Ravel sometimes spent afternoons playing through Russian piano music; Borodin's "Serenade" may certainly have been among the selections that they played or sight-read.<sup>280</sup> Ravel likewise could have encountered Viardot's work, whether published or in manuscript form, through his piano professor Charles de Bériot, who was Viardot's nephew.

Despite stylistic differences, the French vocal serenade features characteristic narratives, meters, and rhythmic gestures, all of which nourish the soil that allow the serenader's flattery to blossom into seduction. Certain attributes of the French vocal serenade, including meter, tempo, and prevailing dynamic levels, carry over into its instrumental counterpart, suggesting that the genre possesses a distinct identity that transcends narrative and performance medium.

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<sup>280</sup> A typical entry in Viñes's journal may simply note that the two played through piano music one afternoon; for a list of specific composers whose works Ravel and Viñes played, see Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 16.

Viardot's serenade includes rhythms and gestures that, whether characteristic of contemporary Spanish music or not, nevertheless encapsulated French notions of Spanish musical styles.<sup>281</sup> The accented opening melody, performed by the thumbs and forefingers of both hands, occupies the piano's middle register; the right hand arpeggiates triads above the melody, while the left hand's bass notes mark time. As the accompaniment maintains a binary division of the compound duple meter, the accented melody superimposes a ternary division with its first few notes, creating a polyrhythmic effect (Example 5.3). The texture and articulations in the accompaniment, including occasional arpeggiated chords, suggest guitar figurations, while the polyrhythms, narrow melodic ranges, and melodic pitch repetition evoke characteristics of flamenco (Example 5.4).<sup>282</sup>

**Example 5.3. Pauline Viardot, *Sérénade*, mm. 5-10.**



<sup>281</sup> The Parisian-born Viardot, who hailed from a distinguished Spanish family that produced singers and vocal pedagogues, composed music in various national styles, but was also intimately familiar with Spanish musical traditions.

<sup>282</sup> Israel J. Katz, "Flamenco" and "Cante hondo," *Grove Music Online* (accessed 29 May 2008).

**Example 5.4.** Viardot, *Sérénade*, melodic reduction, mm. 5-10.



Each repetition of the melody grows increasingly elaborate, sometimes doubled at the octave, ornamented with grace notes, and encompassing an extended range; Example 5.5 shows one such iteration. The improvisatory passages distinguishing sections or “verses” of the melody also grow more florid as the work progresses, evoking the accompanimental interludes (*falsetas*) of flamenco.

**Example 5.5. Melodic elaboration in Viardot's *Sérénade*, mm.21-24.**



The *alhambrismo* that distinguishes Viardot's serenade appears in other French vocal evocations of Spain. For example, the guitar-like gesture in the right hand of measures 23 and 24—an arpeggiated triad sandwiched between bass note figures—

may be found in Delibes's "Chanson espagnole" (1863)<sup>283</sup> and Massenet's *Nuit d'Espagne* (1874), shown in Example 5.6.<sup>284</sup>

**Example 5.6. Guitar-like gestures in Massenet's *Nuit d'Espagne* and Delibes's *Chanson espagnole*.**

Massenet, *Nuit d'Espagne*, mm. 8-11.



Delibes, *Chanson espagnole*, mm. 11-14.



## Norms and Deviations

*Fin-de-siècle* perceptions of the grotesque and contemporary French examples of the serenade establish specific expectations about Ravel's *Sérénade grotesque*. There are

<sup>283</sup> One of Delibes's best-known songs, "Chanson espagnole"—alternatively titled "Les Filles de Cadiz"—appeared in the collection *Trois mélodies*. The chronology of Delibes's smaller works is sketchy, but "Chanson espagnole" is mentioned by Enrique Alberto Arias in *Comedy in Music: A Historical Bibliographical Resource Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001), 63.

<sup>284</sup> A similar gesture may be seen in Fauré's *Sérénade toscane*, though the strumming figure in this case evokes an Italianate string instrument, perhaps a lute. Many piano works by Albéniz and Granados—specifically those that evoke Spanish characters and settings—do not rely on the same musical gesture for their effect. See, for example, Albéniz's *Suite espagnole*, Op. 47, in which Aragón is the only work in the suite of eight to feature the gesture; it appears infrequently in Granados's *Goyescas* and *Danzas españolas*.

no reactions from contemporary listeners to guide an analysis of the music, since the work was never publicly performed in Ravel's lifetime; the response of a theoretical listener will thus take the place of a reception history.

A contemporary listener might have surmised from *Sérénade grotesque*'s title that the work is derived from a vocal model whose text dramatizes romance in one of its many guises. Listeners with prior knowledge of the vocal serenade might have refined expectations based on others they have heard and extrapolated the characteristics they would expect to hear transferred to a solo piano serenade. Even without such prior knowledge, listeners would have created musical expectations based simply on the word "serenade": probably a lover's song in a moderate tempo with a gentle rhythmic motion. These projections, in turn, would have been mapped onto Ravel's instrumental work: the expected tempo moderate, the rhythms lilting, and the lover's song taking the form of a lyrical melody in one of the pianist's hands.

The "grotesque" in Ravel's title modifies these expectations. Knowing that the French grotesque involves the transgression of boundaries through parody, stylized movement, and *vertige*, among other characteristic attributes, a listener may expect musical surprises and, perhaps, a parody of the genre itself. That same knowledge, however, may invite the listener simply to expect the unexpected. To identify relationships between musical phenomena and contextual sources for the grotesque, we must first apprehend the work as temporal, with a past, present, and future—not just a beginning, middle, and end.

In the analysis that follows, Figure 5.1 will serve as a formal point of reference, particularly regarding thematic and motivic relationships. The letters in the far left column refer to themes (not sections), in which *T* indicates a transitional theme; arrows in the far right column identify alternating thematic material within a phrase or group of phrases.











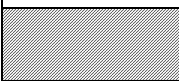





Themes	Measures	Meter	Tempo	Motivic Material		
<b>A</b>	1-10	<b>2/4</b>	quarter = 100	“axis” chord		
<b>T</b>	11-14		<i>rallentando – largo</i>			
<b>B</b>	15-33	<b>6/8</b>	<i>presto</i>	running eighths		
<b>T2</b>	34-40			alternating quarter motive		
				running eighths		
<b>C</b>	41-44		<i>più lento</i>			
	45-56		<i>tempo primo</i>			related to <b>A</b>
<b>D</b>	57-64		<i>poco più lento</i>			
	64-82		<i>più lento</i>			alternating quarter motive
			<i>tempo primo</i>			
<b>B</b>	83-102		<i>presto</i>	running eighths		
<b>T2</b>	103-108			alternating quarter motive		
				running eighths		
<b>C</b>	109-112		<i>più lento</i>			
	113-124		<i>tempo primo</i>			related to <b>A</b>
<b>D</b>	125-132		<i>poco più lento</i>			
			132-142			<i>più lento</i>
	143-158	<b>2/4</b>	<i>tempo primo</i> ( <i>presto</i> ) – quarter = 100	truncated <b>A</b>		
				alternating quarter motive		

Figure 5.1. Themes, meters, tempi, and motives in *Sérénade grotesque*.

*Sérénade grotesque* begins with a series of marcato, *fortissimo* chords that punctuate each beat in the 2/4 meter: a jarring opening unlike the other serenades considered here. In Example 5.7, Ravel exchanges the *cantabile* style of the typical serenade for the indication *très rude* at the work's opening (A), with a metronome marking of 100 to the quarter note.

**Example 5.7. Ravel, *Sérénade grotesque*, mm. 1-3.**

Très rude (♩ = 100)

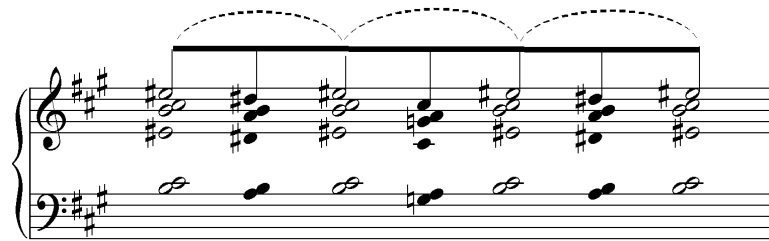
*ff pizzicatissimo*

The arpeggiated right-hand chords in theme A resemble the guitar gestures found in other French evocations of Spain, and Ravel's performance marking—*pizzicatissimo*—suggests that the figure imitates a string instrument of some sort. Although Ravel indicates a key signature (three sharps), he provides little to support it in the work's opening measures. The first chord—functionally ambiguous but perhaps a dominant seventh (B C# E# [G#])—acts as a sort of axis from which other chords depart and return. Lacking conventional harmonic implications, the top notes of each right-hand chord take on a quasi-melodic function, establishing a pitch hierarchy whose logic is governed by relationships between chords rather than key signature (see Example 5.8). The E# in the axis chord functions like a pitch center for the other two “melodic” notes, C# and D#. When the first bass note, a G-natural,



arrives on the downbeat of measure four, it completes a tetrachord of whole-tones that gained prominence through voicing and metric placement (Example 5.9).

**Example 5.8. Chord relationships and the “axis” chord in mm. 1-3.**



**Example 5.9. Whole-tone tetrachord with quasi-melodic and bass pitches.**



Despite the tonal ambiguity of the serenade’s opening, Ravel achieves a degree of stability through rhythm and meter. The first phrase articulates the meter through a rhythmic pattern that marks the first and second beats of each measure clearly, without syncopation or metric anomalies. An exact repetition of the first phrase reinforces rhythmic clarity and simplicity, even as the harmonies continue to obscure the work’s key. When an F# finally appears in the transitional theme (*T*) in measure 11, it does so as part of a tremolo with G-natural, rather than a tonic chord.

Still, the F# sounds like an arrival of sorts, since it is marked by a *sforzando*, initiating the *rallentando* to a lugubrious *largo*. The effect of this arrival is nevertheless undermined by a change in the rhythmic patterns of the opening; the right hand rests on the downbeat of measure 11 while ties obscure the downbeat of measure 13. In the left hand, the rhythmically nondescript tremolo removes the stable metric impulse of the first two phrases.

Following *T*, the first truly melodic theme (*B*) arrives at measure 15 with a change of meter from 2/4 to 6/8, which is more typical of the serenade; the tempo, however, accelerates to a frenzied *presto*. The effect of the metric change is intensified through contrast; unlike the clearly articulated 2/4 meter in *A*, here Ravel obfuscates the new meter with syncopated right-hand chords that suggest a ternary division of the meter, countering the binary division implied by the left-hand melody (Example 5.10).

The left hand begins theme *B* by articulating the first and fourth beats of the meter with octaves and accents—a tactic that typically succeeds in communicating metric organization. Yet the left-hand melody also includes varied rhythmic patterns and notes tied over the barline, both of which undermine a listener's attempts to discern the meter. Meanwhile, repetitive rhythms in the right hand provide an impression of stability, familiarity, and transparent organization despite the fact that all of the rhythms are syncopated. Faced with these variables, the listener, who finds the meter difficult to discern, may clarify the music by re-structuring rhythmic and metric relationships.

**Example 5.10. Competing binary and ternary metric divisions in mm. 15-20.**

The musical score for Example 5.10 consists of two systems of music, measures 15-20. The tempo is marked 'Presto' with a quarter note equal to 120 beats per minute. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The time signature is 6/8. The music is written for piano, with a forte (f) dynamic marking. The score illustrates competing binary and ternary metric divisions. In measures 15-17, the right hand features triplets of eighth notes, while the left hand has pairs of eighth notes. In measures 18-20, the right hand has pairs of eighth notes, while the left hand features triplets of eighth notes. The right hand has a melodic extension in measure 19, which is a running, staccato figure.

As demonstrated in Example 5.11, the listener may find that the easiest way to organize the music is to shift the downbeat by one eighth note, placing the right hand chords on beats one, three, and five and dividing the compound meter into three rather than two beats. Left-hand figures alternatively support and undermine this arrangement, and the listener may lurch between actual and perceived metric organizations, finding both awkward. The melodic extension seen in Example 5.11, measure 19, introduces a running, staccato figure whose second note takes on the characteristics of a downbeat. In contrast to the isolated eighth note that begins the figure, the second note appears with a right-hand chord; in addition, the figure outlines a first-inversion F#-minor triad whose members are reinforced by a right-hand chord, further emphasizing both the ternary division of the meter and the metric

shift that situates the chords on beats one, three, and five. With the metric shift in effect, the G that completes measure 20, stated in three octaves, effectively closes the previous phrase by ending on the last beat of measure 20 rather than the downbeat of measure 21.

**Example 5.11. Perceived metric shift, mm. 15-20 (compare to Ex. 5.10).**

The musical score for Example 5.11 consists of two systems of piano music. The first system covers measures 15 to 17, and the second system covers measures 18 to 20. The time signature changes from 3/4 in measures 15-17 to 18/2 in measures 18-20. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). The music is marked with 'sf' (sforzando) and includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings. The score is written for piano with a treble and bass staff.

As *B* progresses, Ravel alternates between the two-measure and the extended versions of the left-hand melody. Each figure provokes a different organizational tendency in the listener, who either hears the meter vacillating between two organizational possibilities or struggles to locate the meter altogether. A second transitional theme (*T2*) beginning in measure 34 introduces a new figure sandwiched between snippets of familiar material (see Example 5.12). The interaction between

these ideas—the new and the familiar—perpetuates rhythmic and metric uncertainty. The new figure consists of quarter notes alternating between the hands, with the right playing accented notes on beats two, four, and six as the left sounds chords on beats one, three, and five. Along with the right-hand accents, which destabilize the meter, the first note in the group of running eighths prompts the listener to hear the quarter note that follows as a strong beat—in this case, beat five in a ternary division of 6/8 (Example 5.12 above, bottom staves).

**Example 5.12.** In (a), *Sérénade grotesque*, mm. 34-37 as written. In (b), metric shift, shown with dashed barlines.

(a)

(b)

While the new figure suggests metric displacement, the material Ravel preserves from *B* continues to arouse ambivalence. An inverted version of the left hand's descending, melodic extension appears in measure 36 (Example 5.12 above) accompanied by right-hand chords similar to those found in the previous section. If the isolated first note in the series (G) resembles a pick-up in measure 36, then the F# might fall on the perceived downbeat, followed by the D and B to complete the triad on the strong beats of the measure. The right hand supports this metric alignment, with the first *sforzando* chord falling on the "downbeat" and the melodic fragment occupying the other two strong beats. In the left hand, however, the inverted melodic extension struggles to adjust to the perceived meter. While shifting the F# helps the listener apprehend the metric organization of the right hand, this arrangement breaks down when the figure ends awkwardly on beat six, tied to the downbeat of the following measure.

As the melodic extension from *B* trails off, Ravel continues to obscure the written meter in the third theme (*C*), which incorporates material from *A* and *T2*. Situated between the alternating quarter-note figure from *T2* and a variation on the chords from *A* is a new idea, primarily harmonic and rhythmic, marked *più lento*. Beginning in measure 41 (Example 5.13), the left hand employs a binary division of 6/8, while the right hand alternates between duple rhythms that support the meter and eighth-note figures that challenge it through metric placement and accents.

**Example 5.13. Binary division of the meter and metric ambiguity, mm. 41-45.**

The musical score for Example 5.13, measures 41-45, is written in 6/8 time. The tempo is marked 'più lento'. The piano part begins with a 'pp' (pianissimo) dynamic and a 'crescendo' marking. The right hand features a melodic line with a '2' (second) fingering. The left hand has a bass line with a '6' (sixth) fingering. The score illustrates a binary division of the meter and metric ambiguity.

For four measures, the listener is immersed in the *più lento*, which seems loosed from its metric tethers; the *tempo primo* at measure 45 jolts the listener back to a more insistent, if still unstable meter before the *più lento* emerges again, four bars later. Throughout this interchange, Ravel varies the dynamics from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, employing both sudden and gradual changes in volume.

***A “Sentimental” Melody***

By this point the listener, who has heard the opening material and at least one melodic theme, has made some adjustments to her expectations, allowing her to accept the perpetual uncertainty that seems to govern the work. Yet, despite her recognition that rhythmic and metric instability seems to be the rule rather than the exception, her mind still seeks clarity and order. In *C*, metric ambiguity and rapidly alternating phrases and tempos are perhaps less of a surprise than they would have been before, given the listener’s adjusted expectations. More surprising is the material that enters

midway at the *poco più lento*. Following a change of key signature (from the assumed F# minor to B-flat minor), Ravel introduces a melody (*D*) in measure 57 marked *très sentimental*—one that would have been quite at home in a French vocal serenade (Example 5.14).

**Example 5.14. Serenade melody with dual accompanimental divisions of the meter, mm. 57-59.**

The listener is left to wonder whether “sentimental” evokes a rhapsodic aria or an ironic burlesque of the typical romantic serenade. While the melody’s phrase structure, range, and contour resemble those of vocal serenades, its rhythms, particularly the hemiola and polyrhythmic effects, are more like Viardot’s. Even though both melody and accompaniment suggest a straightforward binary division of the meter, the listener’s tendency to simplify may override this organization. Despite the beamed three-chord groups in the left hand, the chords alternate in pairs, exaggerating the polyrhythm already present between right and left hands. The duple eighth notes in the melody produce a 2:3 ratio with the beamed groups of three



chords; hearing the left-hand figure in groups of two, however, makes the rhythmic relationship between the hands even murkier.

With most of the melody's rhythms organized as duples, the group of three eighth notes in measure 59 sounds like a departure from the norm: an illusory elongation of a single beat rather than simple eighth notes marking time. To conclude the melody, Ravel introduces a figure in measure 63 whose effectiveness relies on the juxtaposition of contrasting metric organizations. The fact that the measure is perceived as hemiola despite the preceding metric ambiguity indicates that the binary division of the meter has gained priority through the duple rhythms in the right hand.

The alternating quarter-note figure from *T2* appears twice in the serenade melody, the second time as a transition back to the opening material, which Ravel truncates dramatically. At the *Tempo primo* in measure 113, Ravel alternates figures from *A* (the "axis" chord with its companions) and *T2/C* (the quarter-note motif), allotting each a full measure before rhythmically compressing both figures into the same bar.<sup>285</sup> When *B* returns, the *presto* tempo and metric ambiguity remain intact, with the right hand occasionally exchanging offbeat arpeggiated chords for ornamental flourishes that further contribute to the metric confusion, as seen in Example 5.15. Much of the *C* material is repeated without variation or transposition of pitches: no development or tonal progress has been achieved. When the serenade melody (*D*) reappears, it does so in the same "key," enhanced only by octaves in the right hand. At the last *Tempo primo* (also marked *presto*), Ravel uses material first

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<sup>285</sup> The meter does not return here to the 2/4 of the opening.

heard at the return of A, alternating, compressing, and contrasting the *pianissimo* quarter-note motif with the *fortissimo* “axis” series. The work ends with a dramatic *fff*, a broadening of tempo, and left-hand tremolos leading up to the final sonority: an F# major added-sixth chord that sounds quizzically incomplete (Example 5.16).

**Example 5.15. Ornamental melodic flourishes, mm. 93-94.**



**Example 5.16. *Sérénade grotesque*, final chord, m. 158.**



**Transgressive Conventionalism: Paradox in Ravel’s Grotesque**

In *Sérénade*, Ravel constantly alludes to conventional musical practice, employing key signatures, idiomatic keyboard writing, and a sectional form unified by transitional material and thematic reprisals. If the grotesque involves the

transgression of boundaries, why would Ravel remain bounded by musical convention? The act of violating a boundary gains greater expressive and emotional power when a composer acknowledges and even retains the boundary as an integral part of the whole: in other words, he “buys in” to a system that he whittles away from the inside out.

Take, for example, Ravel’s treatment of meter in *Sérénade*. At first glance, the use of meter may seem utterly conventional, both for the types of meters selected (2/4 and 6/8) and for their sectional deployment throughout the work. Coupled with metric consistency, however, is a pervasive ambiguity that undermines its status. The insistent, often repetitive rhythms in Ravel’s serenade insistently focus attention on meter, and with it, metric instability. While Ravel articulates the 2/4 meter in *A* with chords on each beat, he challenges the listener’s perception of the meter with each theme thereafter. Right- and left-hand rhythmic patterns present competing metric organizations that may be perceived as polyrhythms, incomplete metric shifts, or simply rhythmic confusion. Like Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelström,” which evokes the grotesque through the reader’s vertiginous confrontation with multiple temporalities, *Sérénade* disorients the listener with conflicting layers of rhythmic and metric interaction.

The fact that Ravel persistently uses meter for both musical organization and its disruption suggests that the boundaries established through meter exist, in large part, to be transgressed by the rhythms that they are meant to contain. At the same time, the “conservative” use of meter—no rapidly changing or irregular meters—

provides the unity and consistency necessary for disjunction to cohere. With the first entrance of *B*, the listener seeks metric organization partly because it was so clearly provided in *A*. As the listener struggles to apprehend metric structures throughout the work, she tacitly accepts them as bounded spaces. This hearing, in turn, enables her to recognize and appreciate their continuous subversion.

Ravel's *Sérénade* parodies the picturesque evocations of love found in vocal serenades while involving at least two levels of discourse. On a strictly musical level, the work challenges expectations of the serenade through meter, tempo, and character: Ravel exchanges swaying, accompanimental patterns for abrupt, marcato chords and begins with an unusual meter (2/4) before switching to the more typical 6/8. Though the moderate opening tempo is appropriate for a serenade, the changes effected for *B*—*presto* tempo, marcato accompaniment, and *sforzandi* at the centers of phrases—seem to inspire anxiety rather than romance. Destabilizing rhythmic patterns and overly dramatic dynamic changes continue until, at last, a traditional serenade melody arrives.

Superimposed over the accompaniment's rhythmic and metric conflicts is a melody that speaks the pensive, amorous language of the serenade with ease. The indication *très sentimental* contrasts with the *très rude* that marked the opening, and there is no evidence in the work itself suggesting that a sentimental performance would be tinged with irony.

Rhythmic and metric analysis may explain a listener's uncertainty while hearing the serenade melody. To what degree, though, does it address the character

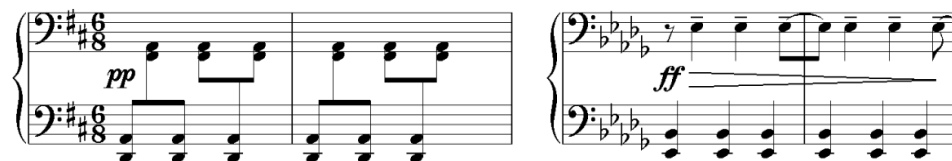
of the serenade melody: earnest or ironic? As is often the case in Ravel's music, the passage itself is obscure, like a tight-lipped magician shielding his secrets. Such a question need not be an interpretive endgame if we accept the grotesque as a motivating factor in the work. Parody may indeed be present, but it is also possible that the work's incongruous character stems from the positioning of a conventional love serenade within a brittle, anxious fantasia. Without coherent tonal relationships, the metric ambiguity that destabilizes at the local level paradoxically acts as a stabilizing, unifying influence on a higher, architectonic level, binding the serenade melody to the contrasting music that precedes and follows it.

### ***Intertextual Spanish Parody***

Besides the musical distortions in Ravel's *Sérénade*, the composer's oeuvre evidences a distinct type of parody common to the French grotesque. Recall the figure of Callot's Capitano, a swaggering Spaniard whom the artist mocks through stylized movements and an absurdly haughty, exaggerated air. For many, Callot's engravings were quintessentially grotesque; his Capitano may well have been on Gautier's mind as he sketched his own verbal portrait of a poetic braggadocio, for Gautier had cited Callot's works several times in *Les Grotesques*. Baudelaire considered Spain—along with Italy and Germany—to be more likely national candidates for producing grotesque works than France, claiming that the French temperament lacked the appetite for the “savage” or the “excessive,” both necessary attributes for the grotesque.

Although *Sérénade grotesque* shares little in common with French vocal evocations of Spain (Massenet's *Nuit d'Espagne* or Delibes's *Chanson espagnole*, for example), it includes articulations and rhythmic figures similar to those in Viardot's serenade.<sup>286</sup> The work's musical lampoon of Spain also prefigures later compositions of Ravel's own, including *L'Heure espagnole*, his farcical tribute to opera buffa (started in 1907), and "Alborada del gracioso" from *Miroirs* (1905), a solo piano work with Iberian influences. The latter, a virtuosic scherzo that combines an aubade with the figure of the "gracioso," a fool from Spanish comedy, juxtaposes terse, sardonic themes with a rhapsodic melody reminiscent of a serenade. As Orenstein notes, both "Alborada" and *Sérénade* feature repetitive figures that alternate between the hands, while the arpeggiated opening chords in "Alborada"—like the first chords in *Sérénade*, crisply articulated and played without pedal—imitate a strummed guitar, as shown in Examples 5.17 and 5.18.<sup>287</sup>

**Example 5.17. Alternating figures in "Alborada del gracioso" (left), mm. 68-69, and *Sérénade* (right), mm. 55-56.**



<sup>286</sup> Arpeggiated chords are a feature common to Ravel's serenade and the aforementioned "Spanish" vocal works, although this sort of figure also appeared in Italianate works like Fauré's *Sérénade toscane*.

<sup>287</sup> Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 140.

**Example 5.18. Strummed guitar gesture in “Alborada” (left), m. 1, and *Sérénade* (right), mm. 1-2.**



If the French linked the grotesque with Spanish themes and characters, then *Sérénade grotesque* is much more than a genre parody. Ravel substitutes the poetic romance conjured by Italianate serenades for a more quixotic portrait of love: all impulse, uncertainty, and capriciousness. Perhaps Ravel, like Baudelaire, found in Spain a wellspring of the grotesque, a place that could serve as both a source of inspiration and a target for satire.

The transgression of boundaries in *Sérénade* occurs not by discarding musical conventions, but by subverting them through extensive use and misuse—a technique that unifies even as it divides. Disjunction may present itself through musical incongruity (metric conflicts or ambiguities, for example), but the source of the disjunction may also act as a unifying factor, as was the case with metric instability: its pervasiveness integrates the music like a tonic key.

*Sérénade*, whose value to scholars has depended largely on its status as an embryonic progenitor of greater things, offers much to appreciate on its own terms. As a specimen of Ravel’s grotesque, the work demonstrates the composer’s ability to engage multiple levels of incongruous, even paradoxical discourse: metric instability

on one level becomes a stabilizing force on another, while parody wears the masks of abstract musical punning and theatrical Spanish farce simultaneously. As with later works, like *L'Heure espagnole*, *Daphnis et Chloé*, and *La Valse*, Ravel weaves the fabric of the *Sérénade*'s grotesque through an intertextual web of musical, cultural, and aesthetic filaments.



## **PART II**

## CHAPTER VI

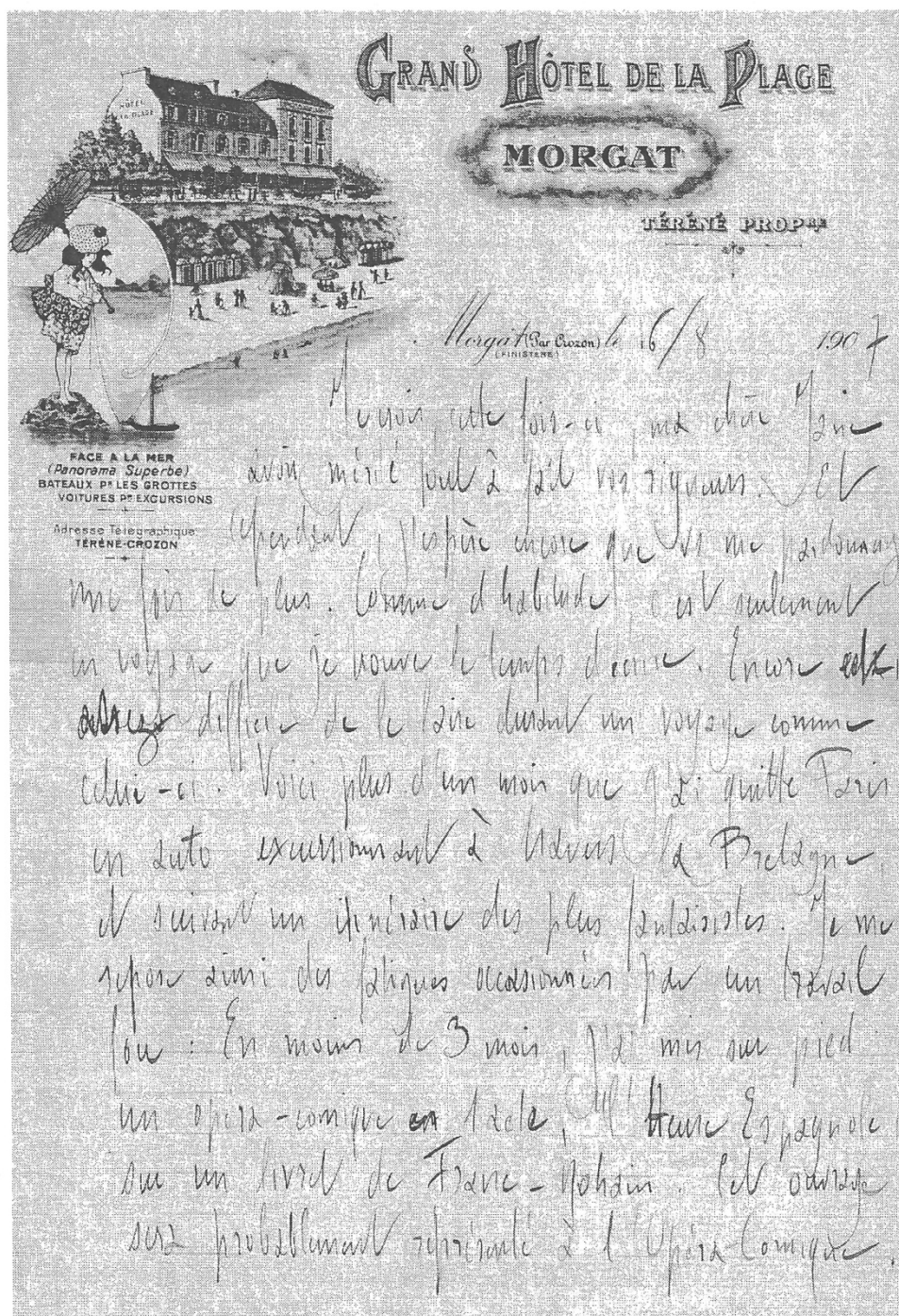
### CLOCKWORK SOULS: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF TIME IN *L'HEURE ESPAGNOLE*

In August 1907, Ravel wrote to family friend Jane Courteault to apologize, as he often did in his letters, for neglecting to be a more faithful correspondent. The letter was written on elaborate stationary from the Grand Hôtel de la Plage, located in the coastal town of Morgat in Brittany, where the composer had finally arrived for a much-needed vacation. Ravel reported that his extended road trip from Paris to Brittany had involved a “capricious itinerary”<sup>288</sup> that had seemed like a great deal of work for a holiday. Nevertheless, it was a holiday Ravel had earned: he claimed exhaustion after three months of frantic work on a comic opera, *L'Heure espagnole*.

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<sup>288</sup> Ravel to Jane Courteault, Morgat, 16 August 1907, in *Ravel Reader*, 90.

Plate 6.1. Letter from Ravel to Jane Courteault, 16 August 1907.<sup>289</sup>



<sup>289</sup> Ravel, *Lettres à Roland Manuel et sa famille*, ed. Jean Roy (Paris: Calligrammes, 1986), 29.

Based on the one-act stage play by Franc-Nohain,<sup>290</sup> *L'Heure* takes place in eighteenth-century Toledo, where Concepcion carries on illicit affairs while her husband Torquemada, local clockmaker and notorious cuckold, is at work. When Concepcion reminds her husband with barely disguised glee that he is scheduled to wind the municipal clocks that day, Torquemada departs, leaving behind his customer Ramiro, a muleteer. Uncomfortable to be left alone with Concepcion, Ramiro nevertheless waits, despite her irritation that the muleteer's presence will intrude upon her scheduled tryst with Gonzalve, a poet. To occupy Ramiro, Concepcion charges him with the task of transporting a grandfather clock to her bedroom. When Gonzalve arrives for his illicit appointment, she urges him inside one of the large clocks and asks Ramiro to carry it upstairs, figuring that she will meet her lover later. Another suitor, the banker Don Inigo Gomez, arrives unexpectedly; he ends up (with some difficulty) in a clock as well.

Ramiro shoulders his burdens ably, and Concepcion grows impressed with his brawn—far more appealing than Gonzalve's pretentious slaving or Inigo's paunchy physique. Finally, she invites Ramiro to her room “without a clock.” When Torquemada returns home, he urges Ramiro to stop by every morning during his rounds to tell his wife the time—an ironic request, considering her surroundings. The opera concludes with a quintet in which the five characters address the audience and, in a parody of comic ensemble finales, sing the opera's epigraph, interjected with

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<sup>290</sup> The play, *L'Heure espagnole* opened for the full-length feature *La Déserteuse* and received fifty-eight performances, though it was scarcely noticed by the press. See Smith, “Ravel's Operatic Spectacles,” 189.

exaggerated trills: “It’s the moral of Boccaccio...there comes a time in the pursuit of love when the muleteer has his turn.”

### **Critical Reception: Unity Among Disjunction**

It took nearly four years from the time Ravel completed the piano-vocal score to bring *L’Heure espagnole* to the stage. The story of the opera’s early performance history is a familiar one: after first refusing the work for its frank off-color humor, Albert Carré, director at the Opéra-Comique, relented, in part due to the efforts of Madame Jean Cruppi, wife of a French government official. As thanks, Ravel dedicated *L’Heure* to Madame Cruppi with “respects and friendship.”

Though Ravel’s patroness was able to shepherd the work to the Opéra-Comique, she could do little to influence its critical reception. In the days and weeks following *L’Heure*’s premiere, a number of prominent reviewers reacted to the work by censuring Ravel’s style in familiar ways—as artificial, cold, calculated, and insincere.<sup>291</sup> Apart from the typical complaints of Ravel’s aesthetic and technical preoccupations, another common theme emerged: the work’s contradictory relationship between music, text, and scenario. Camille Bellaigue identified disjunctions between voice and orchestra, intonation and text, that produced a “double contradiction.”<sup>292</sup> Louis de Fourcaud, who praised Ravel’s “ingenious

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<sup>291</sup> Steven Huebner surveys this particular brand of criticism from contemporary to current accounts in “Laughter: In Ravel’s Time,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (November 2006): 226-227.

<sup>292</sup> Camille Bellaigue, “Revue musicale [review of *L’Heure espagnole*],” *Revue des deux mondes* 6 (1 July 1911): 219. “Ni les voix ne s’accordent avec l’orchestre, ni les intonations avec les paroles. Et déjà cela crée, dans un double domaine, une double contradiction.”

orchestration” and found many aspects of the work “curious and amusing,” made a similar claim: “Unfortunately, there is no agreement between the text and the score, and the cheerfulness of the play suffocates under the musical machinery. The two elements, so to speak, contradict each other.”<sup>293</sup> Gaston Carraud’s disparaging review suggested that the orchestra was “not always compatible with the situation.”<sup>294</sup> For Jean Chantavoine, who bemoaned the music’s “groaning” and “creaking” timbres, Ravel went wrong by highlighting “each line and almost every note with unexpected rhythms.”<sup>295</sup>

The same characteristics criticized by Bellaigue and Carraud, however, produced different assessments from other critics. While Albert Bertelin evoked a duality resembling Bellaigue’s “double contradiction,” he claimed that the musical-textual relationship succeeded through comic understatement: “Textual sallies are emphasized in a most felicitous fashion—with a sang-froid that doubles its savor.”<sup>296</sup> Louis Laloy highlighted specific points of contradiction between music, text, and gesture—Gomez’s “imposing” theme squeezed into a waltz, for example—which

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<sup>293</sup> Louis de Fourcaud, “Musique [review of *L’Heure espagnole*],” *Le Gaulois* (20 May 1911): 3. “Malheureusement, il n’y a point accord entre le poème et la partition, et la gaieté de la pièce est par trop étouffée sous l’appareil musical. Les deux éléments sont, pour ainsi dire, en contradiction.”

<sup>294</sup> Gaston Carraud, “Théâtres [review of *L’Heure espagnole*],” *La Liberté* (21 May 1911). “L’emploi de l’orchestre y est, d’une curiosité recherchée et souvent d’un charme extrême, pas toujours en rapport avec la situation.”

<sup>295</sup> Jean Chantavoine, “Chronique musicale [review of *L’Heure espagnole*],” *La Revue hebdomadaire* 20 (24 June 1911): 580. “Il en a souligné chaque ligne et presque chaque note par des rythmes imprévus,…”

<sup>296</sup> Albert Bertelin, “Thérèse...*L’Heure espagnole*,” *Comoedia illustré* 3 (15 June 1911): 584. “La musique et surtout l’orchestre sont pleins d’esprit; les saillies du text sont soulignée de la plus heureuse façon avec un flegme de pince-sans-rire qui en double la saveur.”

implied a musical game analogous to Franc-Nohain's textual jest, generating a tone of mockery that extended from harmonic progressions and formal structures to orchestral effects.<sup>297</sup>

Despite some positive notices, the asperity of certain critics, particularly Carraud and Lalo, overshadowed these pockets of favorable reception. Given Carré's reluctance to stage *L'Heure*, Ravel had already anticipated some resistance. Starting the campaign early, he spoke with Charles Tenroc of *Comoedia* two days before the work's premiere, explaining his artistic aims and the opera's unusual musical style. Tenroc notes that Ravel's evocation of Spain is "comical, bourgeois, burlesque—very different from the Spain of Bizet, Chabrier, and Laparra."<sup>298</sup> Ravel characterizes the work's atmosphere similarly, adding that the "exaggeration of the burlesque" stands in for operatic lyricism.<sup>299</sup> The relationship between "burlesque" and "grotesque" grows more explicit when Ravel describes the stage décor, particularly those aspects not originally featured in the stage play: "With Franc-Nohain's assent, while the clocks carry on their mischievous racket, I added a few grotesque automatons: some dancers, musical marionettes, a soldier, a cockerel, an exotic bird whose mechanical movements add to the illusion."<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Louis Laloy, "La Musique [review of *L'Heure espagnole*]," *La Grande revue* 15 (10 June 1911): 627-628.

<sup>298</sup> Charles Tenroc, "Les Avant-Premières: 'Thérèse' et 'L'Heure espagnole' à l'Opéra-Comique," *Comoedia* (11 May 1911): 1.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. "D'accord avec Franc-Nohain, j'ai ajouté pendant que les horloges se livrent à leur tintamarre malicieux, quelques automates grotesques: des danseuses, des marionnettes à musique, un soldat, un petit coq, un oiseau des îles dont les mouvements mécaniques ajouteront à l'illusion."

Thirty-six years after the Ravel-Tenroc interview, another link between *L'Heure* and the grotesque surfaced in Charles Koechlin's critical survey of Ravel's life and works. Koechlin sums up Ravel's style with a frank appeal to remember that the composer's technical "perfection" should not overshadow the works that display tenderness, many of which Ravel wrote late in life after deciding that it was "chicanery to continue in the ironic path of *L'Heure espagnole*."<sup>301</sup>

### **Perceptions of Time and the Clock**

From a semantic point of view, Koechlin's detailed critique of *L'Heure* is curious. Koechlin does not say that the character of Gonzalve *is* grotesque, or that the character was perceived as grotesque by contemporary audiences; instead he claims that limitations inherent in Franc-Nohain's characterization "obliged" Ravel to "make a grotesque"<sup>302</sup> (*faire un grotesque*) of Gonzalve. As he blames these faults on a deficient stage play, he makes two important acknowledgments. First, by claiming that Ravel had to follow the play's characterizations, Koechlin implicitly suggests a grotesque presence in the play itself; the model for Ravel's grotesque operatic

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<sup>301</sup> The essay completed in 1947 but not published until 1985. See Charles Koechlin, "Maurice Ravel," ed. François Lesure, *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* 1 (1985): 56. "Peut-être avait-il discerné que, cette retenue extrême de l'expression, le jeu n'en vaut pas toujours la chandelle, et que ç'aurait été duperie de continuer dans la voie d'ironie de *L'Heure espagnole* —"

<sup>302</sup> Koechlin, "Maurice Ravel," 56. Vladimir Jankélévitch similarly assessed Inigo's character Inigo in his 1939 biography of Ravel (English edition published in 1959): "The clocks and the grotesque Inigo [*sic*] Gomez of *L'Heure espagnole* come to life again in the villain and the Corregidor of *Le Tricorne*." See Jankélévitch, *Ravel*, trans. Margaret Crosland (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 52.



creation must have come from the source he was “obliged” to emulate.<sup>303</sup> Second, he acknowledges the existence of a musical grotesque that Ravel imprints upon Franc-Nohain’s textual creation.

Koechlin notes that the play’s characters “behave like ridiculous puppets without real humanity,” offering Gonzalve as one example.<sup>304</sup> Roland-Manuel goes further still in his assessment of the opera, describing the manner in which Ravel inverts human and mechanical characteristics:

Instead of humanizing the characters, and softening the passions which inflamed them, [Ravel] ruthlessly lays bare the elementary mechanisms of their instincts....But, by a weird substitution, the hearts he tore from them come to beat tenderly in the breasts of clocks and automata, lending to these little steel bodies the semblance of a soul and the sweet warmth of life.<sup>305</sup>

This interpretation tacitly expresses an aesthetic implication cited by Koechlin, but otherwise unrecognized by scholars: the association between *L’Heure*’s mechanistic humanity and the grotesque.

In the play, Franc-Nohain’s characters speak in whimsical double entendres, evoking comparisons between human anatomy and Torquemada’s ubiquitous clocks. Concepcion tells Inigo to speak softly, for “clocks have ears” (R36/2), while

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<sup>303</sup> There was no exchange of ideas between composer and playwright before the stage play was produced. Ravel first met Franc-Nohain through a mutual acquaintance, Claude Terrasse, in 1906; *L’Heure espagnole* had premiered two years prior at the Paris Odéon. Smith traces the chronology of Ravel and Franc-Nohain’s respective works in “Ravel’s Operatic Spectacles,” 188-189.

<sup>304</sup> Koechlin argues that the characters imbue Ravel’s opera with a coldness deflating to the spirit of opera buffa, which had been captured with comparative success in works like Chabrier’s *Le Roi malgré lui* and *L’Étoile*.

<sup>305</sup> Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, 51.

Gonzalve rhapsodizes about “the heart of the clock” (R18/8-9).<sup>306</sup> Inverting his anthropomorphic characterizations of automata, Franc-Nohain also employs mechanistic metaphors for humans. As Ramiro hoists the clock containing Don Inigo onto his shoulder, Concepcion warns him that “the works are very fragile, especially the pendulum...” (R40/2-3). Ramiro returns the metaphorical favor as he contemplates Concepcion and the feminine mystique:

When I see assembled here  
All these delicate machines,  
These tiny springs blithely entangled,  
I think of the mechanism that is  
Woman, a mechanism far more complicated!<sup>307</sup>

Later, buried within Gonzalve’s cliché-ridden rhapsody on love, is a comparison between the ticking of a clock and Concepcion’s flesh-and-blood ticker:

A clock, it is your heart, the rhythm is the same,  
Your dancing heart, your beating heart,  
Which is heard with melancholy,  
*The heart of the clock...poem!*<sup>308</sup>

By figuratively exchanging a clock for Concepcion’s heart, Gonzalve removes those attributes most closely associated that organ: warmth, love, and life.

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<sup>306</sup> Maurice Ravel, *L’Heure espagnole* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1996). Citations in both footnotes and text designate the rehearsal number, followed by measure numbers.

<sup>307</sup> R50/2-9. “Quand je vois ici rassemblés/Toutes ces machines subtiles/Tous ces ressorts menus, à plaisir embrouillés/Je songe au mécanisme qu’est/La femme, mécanisme autrement compliqué!”

<sup>308</sup> R17/14–R18/1-10. “Horloge, c’est ton coeur, le rythme en est le même/Ton coeur ballant, ton coeur battant/Que, mélancolique, on entend.../Le coeur de l’horloge...poème!”

Inigo complains that Concepcion's coldness betrays her inhumanity, recalling both Gonzalve's metaphor and Ramiro's wonderment at "mechanical" women:

How my power seems vain,  
If, when her husband is gone,  
A certain beautiful lady will not agree  
To be a little less inhuman!<sup>309</sup>

The psychological implications of comparing humans to automata—and more specifically to clocks—may be better apprehended by considering early modern perspectives on time and the clock. Since the seventeenth century, the well-regulated clock provided a convenient analogue for explaining the elusive operations governing man and the universe.<sup>310</sup> Philosopher and physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie compared the human body to a watch and considered illness merely a matter of regulating the pendulums through the proper application of medicine.<sup>311</sup> Both René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz used clocks as metaphors for an orderly universe guided by pre-existing, celestial principles.

For Descartes, who also described the functions of the human body through mechanistic terminology,<sup>312</sup> the clockwork analogy was not only logical but comforting, since the discrete functions he assigned to body and soul ensured that the

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<sup>309</sup> R35/1-6. "Que ma puissance apparaît vaine/Si, quand son mari est absent/Certaine belle ne consent/A se montrer un peu moins inhumaine!"

<sup>310</sup> Samuel Macey's useful survey examines perceptions of time and the clock in literature, philosophy, science, and visual art from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. See *Clocks and the Cosmos: Time in Western Life and Thought* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1980).

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>312</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 108.

distinction between man and machine remained clear.<sup>313</sup> In explaining the difference between living and dead, Descartes stated that “death never occurs through the absence of the soul”; in fact, it was the presence of the soul in both life and death that separated man from machine, as well as from the animals—nature’s automatons.<sup>314</sup>

If Descartes and Leibniz viewed the clock as a metaphor for divine order, then nineteenth-century writers like Baudelaire and Poe maintained its association with order while rejecting its transcendent, optimistic aura. In “L’Horloge” from *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire describes the clock as a “sinister, dreadful, impassive god.”<sup>315</sup> Another poem, “L’Ennemi” (also from *Fleurs*) features clock’s symbolic counterpart, Time, which “eats away life.”<sup>316</sup> A third poem, “Le Voyage,” shows Baudelaire abandoning circumspect metaphorical language for a more visceral image: Time “puts its foot on our spine.”<sup>317</sup>

Poe parodies time-bound society in his story “The Devil in the Belfry,” in which everything, from the shape and arrangement of the town to the activities of its inhabitants, is slavishly governed by the clock.<sup>318</sup> In another satiric tale, “A

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<sup>313</sup> For an alternative eighteenth-century perspective, see Denis Diderot, *Rameau’s Nephew and D’Alembert’s Dream*, trans. L.W. Tannock (London: Penguin, 1966), 158-160. Diderot suggests fluid boundaries between animal, man, and machine, noting through figurative language their similarities in behavior and experience.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 208-209.

<sup>315</sup> “Horloge! dieu sinistre, effrayant, impassible,…” Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1959), 87.

<sup>316</sup> “Le Temps mange la vie,…” Ibid., 19.

<sup>317</sup> “Lorsque enfin il [le temps] mettra le pied sur notre échine,…” Ibid., 159.

<sup>318</sup> The tale is set in the Dutch borough of Vondervotteimittiss. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Devil in the Belfry,” in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Random House, 1965), 736-742.

Predicament,” Poe’s heroine finds the minute hand of a giant clock descending upon her neck like the “ponderous and terrific *Scythe of Time*.”<sup>319</sup> Even as the great steel hand cuts into her flesh, the woman remains transfixed by the lethal technology, saying “The ticking of the machinery amused me.”<sup>320</sup> Her reluctant fascination with the clock that kills her reflects a growing ambivalence toward technology, when optimistic zeal over “modern” inventions was tempered by the view of machines as interlopers steadily encroaching on human sovereignty. John Philip Sousa voiced these anxieties when he questioned whether machines would supersede human participation even in tender, intimate activities: “When a mother can turn on the phonograph with the same ease that she applies to the electric light, will she croon her baby to slumber with sweet lullabies, or will the infant be put to sleep by machinery?”<sup>321</sup>

### ***L’Homme-Machine: Transgressive Hybridity***

Among the music critics who panned *L’Heure espagnole*, those familiar with Franc-Nohain’s stage play wished that the opera better reflected the text’s verbal and situational burlesque. Modern scholars similarly contrast Franc-Nohain’s farce with

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<sup>319</sup> Poe originally published this tale with a companion piece, “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” which parodies the type of tale found in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. “A Predicament” communicates attitudes toward technology and the clock that are congruent with many of Poe’s other tales, whether or not they share a comical bent (“The Devil in the Belfry” and “The Masque of the Red Death” are examples). See Poe, “A Predicament,” in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 350. Macey also discusses this story in *Clocks and the Cosmos*, 217.

<sup>320</sup> Poe, “A Predicament,” 350.

<sup>321</sup> John Philip Sousa, “The Menace of Mechanical Music,” *Appleton’s Magazine* 8 (1906); reprint, *Computer Music Journal* 17 (1993): 15.

Ravel's doleful music; Steven Huebner finds that in performance, *L'Heure* leaves the spectator "tinged with melancholy" as the music "deflects the frolicking verbal virtuosity of Franc-Nohain's play."<sup>322</sup> For most critics, it is Ravel's music that plays against type by neutralizing much of Franc-Nohain's wit and, as Roland-Manuel's interpretation suggests, depriving human characters of their humanity.

Yet there is plenty of textual evidence indicating that Ravel simply revealed aspects of Franc-Nohain's play that had been muffled by its burlesque physicality. When characters reflect on the inexorable nature of time, their remarks may be dually interpreted as comedy and commentary. Torquemada's statement, "Official time doesn't wait,"<sup>323</sup> refers both to his office as town clock regulator and to the somber truth articulated by Baudelaire in "Le Voyage": that "impassive" time unfolds, whether or not we are conscious of its passage. As Concepcion grows increasingly frantic over Gonzalve's indifference to the waning hour, she finally exclaims, "Time is pitilessly rationed for us!"<sup>324</sup>—an outburst reflecting frustration with her intractable lover while acknowledging awareness of life's brevity.

Inigo compares his confinement inside the clock to the deathly internment of a body: "I'm happy to cross your threshold/Between these narrow boards, as if in a coffin..."<sup>325</sup> After spending time in his clockwork casket, though, Inigo finds his

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<sup>322</sup> Huebner, "*Laughter*," 227.

<sup>323</sup> R11/1-6. "L'Heure officielle n'attend pas."

<sup>324</sup> R21/2-3. "Le temps nous est mesuré sans pitié!..."

<sup>325</sup> R31/1-3. "Il me plaît de franchir ton seuil/Entre ces planches clos, comme dans un cercueil..."

quarters claustrophobic: “Now I languish here, so cramped/That I can’t breathe!”<sup>326</sup> Had he been hiding in a cupboard or closet, his complaint might have carried few metaphorical implications; the clock, however, suggests that time itself is too restrictive. As Franc-Nohain links time with mortality and spatial constraint, he turns the clock into a *memento mori*, whose presence complicates the play as frothy sex farce.

The playwright’s swapping of human and mechanical characteristics is typically played for laughs, relying on verbal and visual innuendo for effect: female “springs,” male “pendulums.” Yet there are moments when the transposition of human and machine reveals the consequences of owning a clockwork soul. In one such instance, Inigo bids farewell to the clock that provided him cover, remarking, “Good-bye, violin body/Of which I, the lover poet, was the soul.” In this moment, the irony of Franc-Nohain’s *l’homme-machine* becomes apparent: by inhabiting a mechanism Inigo embodies that most sacred and human of attributes.<sup>327</sup>

As Inigo metaphorically conflates the clock with the body of an instrument, he extends the animating power of his soul to music. Entangled with the body of time and its musical speech, the temporal processes that govern Inigo’s organic life give way to the temporalities of music and mechanism. Inigo senses this while encased in the clock: the “threshold” he has crossed enacts the same transgression as Poe’s mummer in “The Masque of the Red Death.” The mummer (Death personified, or the

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<sup>326</sup> R96/6-9. “Quand je languis ici, tellement à l’étroit/Que cela me coupe le souffle!...”

<sup>327</sup> R102/6–R103/5. “Adieu, tables du violon/Dont, poète amant, je fus l’âme.”

fear of death animated) crosses a mortal threshold when he enters Prince Prospero's domain—an inversion of the Orphic descent to the underworld, where the River Styx marks the boundary between light and shade. Inigo forges this river when he acts as the soul of a mechanical clock, while other characters achieve transgression through metaphorical hybridity, applying the characteristics and behaviors of automata to each other.

The mute grotesque in Franc-Nohain's play gains voice through Ravel's music in a manner typical of opera: heightening opportunities already implicit in the text. Among *L'Heure*'s strains of aesthetic, cultural, and intertextual parody, many scholars note the ensemble finale as illustrative, with its absurd accumulation of vocal trills a send-up of the centuries-old fetish for operatic virtuosity.<sup>328</sup> Huebner finds that the abundant attention Ravel lavishes on his prosody results in a caricature of opera buffa's *secco recitative*:

The recitative of *L'Heure espagnole* is less conversational *per se* than a *parody* of conversation, at once adhering to the character of quotidian language by erasing most “mute e”s...while also carefully observing prosodic accent and concurrently exaggerating the natural inflections of everyday speech.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Ravel, for his part, eschewed the notion of parody in *L'Heure*, writing in a draft of a letter to *Le Figaro* that he wanted to revive “not the light, parodic, and at times sentimental French operetta, but the old Italian opera buffa” (“...faire revivre non l’opérette française légère et parodique, parfois sentimentale, mais l’ancien bouffe italien”). The quote appears in one of Ravel's drafts of a letter to *Le Figaro*. In an appendix to his article “*Laughter*: In Ravel's Time,” Huebner helpfully includes an appendix with transcriptions of the five drafts Ravel produced, which, he notes, have been conflated and transposed in previous reprints. See “*Laughter*,” 245. For other discussions of parody in the work, see Souillard, “Commentaire,” 96, 105;

<sup>329</sup> Huebner, “*Laughter*,” 232.



This parody of language carries over into a lampoon of opera buffa, which Ravel achieves by positioning his own opera as a regeneration of Italian comic opera while satirizing the genre's musical conventions.<sup>330</sup> Richard Langham Smith notes how Ravel folds Spanish pastiche into the parodic finale by exaggerating the characters' flamenco-inspired vocal inflections, capitalizing on French perceptions of Spain as a decadent nation in decline.<sup>331</sup> For Souillard, the finale complements Gonzalve and Inigo's respective seduction songs, which parody the love serenade—a reference with intertextual overtones that recall *Sérénade grotesque*'s heterogeneous parodies of musical genre and Iberian culture.<sup>332</sup>

A number of scholars, including Huebner, Souillard, and Keith Clifton, have noted Ravel's loosely leitmotivic treatment of musical themes and characters.<sup>333</sup> Huebner suggests that the Ravel's leitmotifs, employed with poker-faced predictability in a comic context, reject organic processes and their metaphysical accoutrements. *L'Heure*'s leitmotivic variations consist of “small melodic changes, different harmonies and new orchestration”—surface manifestations that unfold as if

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>331</sup> Smith, “Ravel's Operatic Spectacles,” 189-191, 199.

<sup>332</sup> The francophone Souillard even uses the term “grotesque” to describe Inigo's serenade: “Frisant la vulgarité, Don Inigo se lance dans une sérénade, parodie des duos d'amour de l'opéra conventionnel. Mais ici tout est grotesque: la situation scénique, puisque ces serments d'amour sortent d'horloge, la musique de ce quatrain avec les *e* muets renforcés par *glissando* des harpes, *pizzicati*, les contretemps, les roucoulaides des bois, les petites notes bouffonnes.” See Souillard, “Commentaire,” 96, 105.

<sup>333</sup> Both Clifton and Souillard provide a scene-by-scene analysis of themes, though with differing methodologies: Clifton highlights mostly structural and motivic relationships, while Souillard considers the effect of motives and orchestration on the viewer's perceptions of characterization, time, and mortality. See Keith Clifton, “Maurice Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole*: Genesis, Sources, Analysis (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1998), 164-230; Christine Souillard, “Commentaire littéraire et musical,” *L'Avant-Scène* 127 (1990): 84-113.

obeying mechanistic principles, the musical clockwork shifting in small, calculated increments.<sup>334</sup> In distancing themselves from Wagnerian procedures, Ravel's musical-textual disjunctions enable an interpretation that values "piquant effects" and compositional craft revealed through the musical surface.<sup>335</sup>

If Ravel's leitmotivic tactics reflect mechanistic processes, they sometimes elude a fundamental characteristic of the machine: consistency.<sup>336</sup> A motivic relationship evoking one character may also refer to another, while motivic variations rarely point to a character's state of mind or a metaphorical subtext; instead they to shift without dramatic intention. Though some scholars identify the opening parallel chords of the overture with the clock shop, Huebner sees a relationship between this motive and Torquemada, which "suggests interchangeability of function between people and objects."<sup>337</sup> In fact, Ravel's music not only complements Franc-Nohain's analogies between the human and the mechanical; it also accretes relationships in addition to those in the text. When Ravel links the opening clock motive with both Ramiro's ruminations on femininity and Gonzalve's clockwork adventures (first comparing Concepcion to a clock and, later, climbing inside one), he unifies discrete

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<sup>334</sup> Huebner, "*Laughter*," 241.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-244.

<sup>336</sup> Huebner's mechanistic metaphor is a metaphor twice-removed: it begins with Bergson's analogy between comedy and mechanization before extending to Ravel's musical procedures. I do not take issue with Huebner's oblique approach, and in fact, I find it a fitting way to characterize *L'Heure*. Often it seems that conventional analytical techniques tend to reveal what is most conventional about Ravel, and rarely what is most remarkable; there is something to be said, then, for an analysis that is as elliptical as the composer's music. In considering Ravel's variable leitmotifs, however, I am tracing Huebner's extended metaphor back to its origins, which lie in the machine itself.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

moments of characterization by a common theme: the tenuous relationship between human and machine.

More overt than musical allusions, however, are the moments when Ravel dramatizes the transgressive act that joins the lifeless mechanism with the breathing, thinking human body. As Inigo thinks of climbing into a clock to seduce Concepcion, Ravel transforms his pompous dotted-rhythm motive to a waltz theme, which continues as Inigo stuffs himself into a clock too small for his paunch (Example 6.1). The waltz's ironic trope on Inigo's bumbling ballet seems too felicitous a union to dissect: like probing a soap bubble, seeking metaphorical meaning in such a moment seems to deflate its comic effect.

**Example 6.1. In (a), *L'Heure espagnole*, variation on Inigo's motive, R42/8-9. In (b), its waltz transformation, R43/1-4.**

(a)

B. Cl.

Sarr.

*pp*

(b)

Mouvt de Valse

VI. II

*pp*

Hp.

C.b. *pp*

When Ravel revisits the waltz in Scene 12 to accompany Inigo's vain seduction of Concepcion, he invites reflection on the cultural associations particular to this dance. Despite its popularity in nineteenth-century European courts, the waltz was criticized for reasons moral and medical: the face-to-face hold connoted eroticism, while the whirling of the dance was considered harmful to the female partner, evoking strong passions and exercising deleterious effects on a woman's brain and spine.<sup>338</sup> As Inigo tries to seduce Concepcion by amusing her, Ravel uses the waltz's lingering associations with romance to provide satirical commentary: Inigo's affected levity only affirms his impotence, while the waltz glibly plays on, like a serenade performed to an empty balcony.

More than a musical ironist, however, the waltz is a unifying agent between physically incompatible parties: man, animal, and machine, each with distinct claims to sentience. As the waltz plays, Inigo sings "cou-cou" at erratic intervals from within the clock, alienating his humanity (and prefiguring Gonzalve's claim that he endows a clock with his own soul). Yet Inigo's speech does not merely copy the machine—rather, it imitates the clock's own imitations of nature. If the mechanical cuckoo mimics a real species of bird, then Inigo's voice evokes both types; his simulated bird cries, performed *falsetto*, further distance himself from "natural" human speech and ease his passage from human to hybrid. The "cou-cou" cries, woven into the musical fabric, recall the waltz's choreographic circularity—the union

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<sup>338</sup> Sevin Yaraman, *Revolving Embrace: The Waltz as Sex, Steps, and Sound* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2002), 7.

of the partners through its hold, and the circles that its steps trace around the dance floor. Inigo fails to achieve the union he seeks with Concepcion, but the waltz transcends its purely ironic function by successfully wedding human and mechanical characteristics.

Inigo's voice does not empower the clock to speak any new words, but rather perpetuates its mindless mimicry of nature; thus instead of forming a new type of creature, he becomes a jumbled union of disparate parts that can neither interact with nor displace one another. In Baudelaire's "De l'essence du rire," Virginia Swain comments on a similar phenomenon when Pierrot transgresses natural law following his beheading:

Cut in two, the dead body goes on living, with a mind of its own, as it were, independent of its cranium. Matter, which first seemed as ordinary and natural as beef cattle or ham, now operates like a machine moved by its own laws, which are not those of organic nature. Pierrot's character, his 'monomania,' continues to find expression in a body without a head....Pierrot is not so much a 'person' as an automaton, mechanically generating figures without reference to an origin or end.<sup>339</sup>

Like Pierrot, Inigo is a living contradiction—a hybrid figure who, by seeking human companionship, evokes a liaison reminiscent of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale, "Der Sandmann," in which Nathanael desires the automaton Olympia.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Swain, *Grotesque Figures*, 18.

<sup>340</sup> That Ravel had produced sketches for an opera based on Hoffmann's tale suggests his long-standing interest in such a theme; his *symphonie horlogère* survived the otherwise aborted project, becoming the overture to *L'Heure*. This *symphonie*, sketched around 1898-1899, was the only remnant of the opera to have survived; it seems that neither a manuscript nor an autograph can be traced. See Zank, *Maurice Ravel*, 367, and Souillard, "Commentaire," 91.

Gonzalve, the first character to climb into a clock, compares his hideout to a coffin, relishing the “new sensations” he experienced as he crossed the metaphorical “threshold” from life to death. Inigo’s hybridity and his hiding place distance him from organic life; his pursuit of Concepcion thus reaches from the clock’s “coffin” to the living realm—another inversion (and perversion) of Orphic narrative, as Concepcion makes no attempt requite her lover’s flirtation or meet him on the other side.

As Inigo woos Concepcion from the clock, his “cou-cou” cries reverberate from the hollows of a mechanism to human ears. Yet if Inigo enjoins himself with a machine, can it be said that Concepcion maintains her humanity? Throughout the opera, the other (male) characters describe her as “inhuman,” comparing her heartbeat to the ticking of a clock, and commenting on mysterious female “mechanisms” generally. Like the paradoxical transgression in “Maelström,” the notion of a grotesque romance in Inigo’s seduction scene proves inadequate, or at least incomplete, for the transgression also presents itself through Concepcion’s own ambiguous identity. Perhaps both she and Inigo are hybrids of some sort; if so, they are, in a sense, made for each other.

### **Time, Mortality, and the Grotesque**

Time is a ubiquitous character in any story. An opera may enact the drawing room dalliances of a single day or a mythic fable spanning generations, but the present actions and changing psychological states of characters implicitly acknowledge a

dramatic past: a time when lovers joined and parted, oaths were sworn and broken, prophecies concealed and revealed. As the audience sets aside watches (and today, cell phones), time becomes transformed, malleable: it is manipulated by the composer, determined by dramatic events, subject to musical rules of organization. Time is the only character whose costume changes from moment to moment.

Few operas, however, are explicitly about time. It is important to keep this in mind when examining *L'Heure espagnole*, whose title refers simply to the temporal window in which the clock shop antics unfold. Franc-Nohain employs several references to time and mortality in the play, but Ravel seems to take the playwright's conceit one step further, making Time the opera's primary subject and star. Ravel's decision to foreground time is nowhere more evident than in the opera's overture, which combines the sounds of actual clocks (set to tick at precise times)<sup>341</sup> with overt manipulations of rhythm and meter. Had Ravel simply wanted to establish the opera's locale, he could have chosen a more circumspect route; in fact, friend and former student Manuel Rosenthal wished that he had done so. Rosenthal found that Ravel overreached in the overture with music that was unnecessarily complex:

It has too many effects, I must say. Only Ravel could have invented them, certainly, but the result is almost an inventory, a demonstration. An opulent demonstration, yet all the same, to convene such a large orchestra for a work as short and light as this?...Nothing, neither in the action nor in the conception of the music, requires such an orchestral deployment.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Franc-Nohain indicated that throughout the play, the sound of clocks ticking at different times should be present. Ravel realized Franc-Nohain's directive with great precision, writing into the overture three clocks set at different metronome markings. For a mention of Franc-Nohain's stage design, see Clifton, "Maurice Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole*," 48.

<sup>342</sup> "Il y a trop d'effets, il faut bien le dire. Ravel seul pouvait les inventer, certes, mais c'est presque un inventaire, une démonstration. Une démonstration opulente mais, tout de même, convoquer un si

The “opulent demonstration” to which he refers is the technical virtuosity required from the performers—the extreme registers and varied timbres that conjure the atmosphere of the clock shop almost exclusively with conventional orchestral instruments.<sup>343</sup> Equally on display, however, is Ravel’s compositional virtuosity, which turns the nuts and bolts of musical time—rhythm and meter—into a complex sonic mechanism.

Before examining the role of musical time and the grotesque in *L’Heure*, it will be helpful to consider the nature of time more generally, focusing in particular on two contemporary theories of time offered by Albert Einstein and Henri Bergson. The intent here is not to suggest Ravel’s awareness of scientific and philosophical debates over time, or to imply that his opera was the product of an irrepressible *Zeitgeist*. Yet the fact that *L’Heure* was written and premiered in years contemporary with Einstein’s emerging theories (and Bergson’s criticisms of them), is significant, for the opera plays with the very materials at the source of the Einstein-Bergson debate: measuring and perceiving time. Though circling through theories of time may seem a circuitous route to travel—particularly with respect to the grotesque—doing so will allow us to make an important discovery: the transgression of time motivates the opera’s grotesque effect, which in turn engages perceived disjunctions between music, character, and text.

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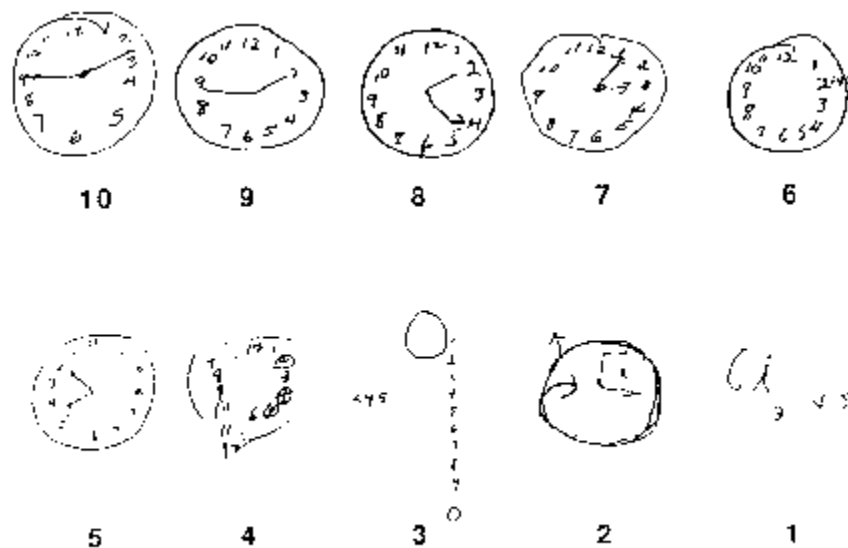
large orchestre pour une chose aussi brève et aussi légère...Car rien, ni dans l’action ni dans la conception de la musique, ne demande un pareil déploiement orchestral.” Manuel Rosenthal, *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal*, ed. Marcel Marnat (Paris: Hazan, 1995), 28.

<sup>343</sup> Exceptions to the standard orchestra include the three ticking clocks and the sarrusophone, a nineteenth-century hybrid brass instrument that used a double reed.



### *Excursus: Einstein, Bergson, and Contemporary Theories of Time*

In 1989, a study was published in the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society*, the results of which unexpectedly resonate with a debate over the nature of time conducted nearly 80 years prior. Sixty-seven patients with Alzheimer's disease were asked to draw a clock with numbers on it, followed by the instruction to make the hands on the clock read 2:45.<sup>344</sup> Figure 6.2 shows sample clock faces from the study, rated from "best" to "worst" by evaluators. Patients with severe dementia struggled to represent time on the clock accurately, particularly with regard to the shape and numerical organization of a typical clock face.



**Figure 6.1. Samples of clock drawings from Alzheimer patients with evaluations from "best" (10) to "worst" (1).<sup>345</sup>**

<sup>344</sup> T. Sunderland, J.L. Hill, A.M. Mellow, B.A. Lawlor, J. Gundersheimer, P.A. Newhouse, and J.H. Grafman, "Clock Drawing in Alzheimer's Disease: A Novel Measure of Dementia Severity," *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 37 (August 1989): 726.

<sup>345</sup> From Sunderland, et al., "Clock Drawing," 726.

While the study was intended to provide a snapshot measurement of patient dementia, it generated an inadvertent byproduct: evidence of the human mind's conflation of time with its visual and spatial symbol, the clock. As Alzheimer patients gradually lose the capacity to distinguish past, present, and future, their temporal disorientation is reflected spatially through their inability to draw the mechanism that represents time.

The perceptual and philosophical implications of the Alzheimer study could not have been fully realized without the second of Einstein's 1905 publications, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," which revolutionized modern conceptions of time and space. In his explanation of special relativity for the general public, Einstein poses a thought experiment that exposes a fundamental flaw in classical, or Newtonian, mechanics.<sup>346</sup> He describes standing in front of a window in a train car moving at a uniform speed, then dropping a stone and observing its motion: the stone falls in a straight line to the embankment. Another observer, however—a pedestrian on a footpath—notes that the stone's trajectory is parabolic rather than straight. Einstein then asks which perspective is correct: "Do the 'positions' traversed by the stone lie 'in reality' on a straight line or on a parabola? Moreover, what is meant here by motion 'in space'?"<sup>347</sup> To resolve these questions, Einstein suggests that motion is

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<sup>346</sup> First, a caveat: only those aspects of the theory with particular relevance to the treatment of time in Ravel's opera will be considered here. There are both major themes and subtle corollaries to relativity theory, including the behavior of light and accelerated versus non-accelerated motion, that will not be addressed.

<sup>347</sup> Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, trans. Robert W. Lawson (New York: Pi Press, 2005), 13.

conditional according to a frame of reference in space and time, for both the train and the embankment are in motion relative to each other.<sup>348</sup> A passenger on a train moving at uniform speed could justifiably claim that she is stationary while the embankment is in motion; an observer on the embankment could claim that the train is in motion while he is stationary. There is no “independently existing trajectory,” but only trajectories relative to a point of reference—in this case, the train car or the footpath.

Likewise, all motion on a trajectory must take place relative to specific points in time. If I want to identify the location of an object, I need to specify a time in addition to providing spatial coordinates; in this sense, time becomes a fourth point of reference in a three-dimensional system of perception.<sup>349</sup> Associated with this mode of perception is the phenomenon known as time dilation, which dictates that a clock in motion ticks more slowly than a stationary clock,<sup>350</sup> since the first clock’s motion through space slows its progress through time.

Certain principles in Einstein’s theory regarding the nature of time caught the attention of Henri Bergson, who challenged the notion of time as a dimension of space.<sup>351</sup> In “The Perception of Change” (*La Perception du changement*, 1911),

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>349</sup> It was Hermann Minkowski who elaborated on the concept of four-dimensional space, although “Minkowski space” does not include provisions for gravity. See *Relativity*, xi, xiv.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>351</sup> In 1922, physicist and philosopher finally met at the Collège de France, although they found no point of conciliation between their respective theories. Bergson’s 1922 rebuttal to Einstein, *Duration and Simultaneity* (*Durée et simultanéité: À propos de la théorie d'Einstein*) did little to advance his cause, for it contradicted previous formulations of Bergson’s while misinterpreting Einstein’s work.

Bergson takes on Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. When the two hold a footrace, the tortoise receives a head start of about one hundred meters; Zeno notes that once Achilles catches up the distance that separates him from the tortoise, the latter will have traveled a short distance further. When Achilles makes up the new distance, the tortoise still will have gained a slight advantage. Each time Achilles tries to make up the distance that he lags, the tortoise will continue to add more distance, however incremental, between them, making him the eventual winner in the race.

Bergson defuses the paradox with a simple question: since common sense dictates that the tortoise would lose, he asks Achilles how he won the race. Achilles responds that he did not run according to Zeno's description, by moving from a starting point to the point that the tortoise had last occupied; instead, he took one step after another until he finally passed the tortoise. "I thus accomplish a series of indivisible acts," says Bergson's Achilles, whose movement through the race is not a series of immobilities to be broken down or built up from one fixed point to another.<sup>352</sup>

According to Bergson, we perceive time in the same way Achilles was encouraged to perceive movement by confusing "succession with simultaneity; in space, and only in space, is there a clear-cut distinction of parts external to one another."<sup>353</sup> To understand the role of consciousness and duration in the perception

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See Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, eds., *Henri Bergson: Key Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 26.

<sup>352</sup> Henri Bergson, "The Perception of Change," in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 257-258.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

of time, Bergson addresses the conflation of time with the clock, its spatial symbol. Clocks break time into discrete units of the same length, presenting the illusion that there is a “homogeneous inner duration, similar to space, the moment of which are identical and follow, without penetrating, one another.”<sup>354</sup>

In space, only one position of the clock’s hands presently exists; our minds organize previous positions of the clock’s hands to generate a perception of time past—a process that generates “true duration.” As a result, time flows: it may not be abstracted into discrete moments like points in space. Dissolving sugar in water, for example, requires Bergson to wait in a way that engages his consciousness of time flow:

For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*.<sup>355</sup>

Though a fourth spatial dimension may be constructed from “homogenous” perceptions of clock-based time, true duration is a product of consciousness and memory.

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<sup>354</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (New York: Harper, 1960), 109.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

### ***Rhythm, Meter, and Temporal Perception***

Franc-Nohain's characters develop into grotesque hybrids through physical acts and verbal metaphors: Inigo and Gonzalve become the soft, organic centers of clocks, while characters compare human organs and biological processes with mechanisms. Hybridity bears metaphysical implications, for the characters transgress mortal boundaries by taking on the attributes of lifeless automata. While Ravel's musical grotesque emerges through heightened characterization, it also manifests itself through temporal displacements like those encountered in Poe's "Maelström," foregrounding the grotesque through the temporally vertiginous experience of listening. *L'Heure* is a work that not only functions "in time," like any other, but is explicitly *about* time; like Poe, Ravel achieves the grotesque by drawing conflicting temporalities into the same orbit, generating unity among disjunction.

As Ravel challenges perceptions of musical time through tempo, rhythm, meter, and performance duration, he questions the mechanisms—clocks, space, experience, and memory—that "measure" time, sounding a theme central to the Einstein-Bergson debate. By exposing the rift between temporal modes of perception, Ravel undermines an assumption essential to Western thought: that time is regular and predictable, with a definite beginning and ending. To challenge this assumption is to challenge the temporal machinery of Western society, opening listeners to alternative modes of perception like those advocated by Bergson and Einstein.

In *L'Heure's* overture, Ravel introduces the transgressive temporal relationships that emerge in various guises throughout the opera. At the outset, the work begins with shifting meters of 5/4 and 3/4 in phrases of varying, unequal lengths (shown in Table 6.1), with the rhythm in the cellos implying a 3 + 2 metric subdivision.<sup>356</sup> Ravel instructs that three clock pendulums corresponding to 40, 100, and 232 to the quarter note sound throughout the overture, producing a web of polyrhythms based on mathematical proportions that interact with the orchestra's tempo of 72 to the quarter note.<sup>357</sup> Amidst the apparent rhythmic and metric disjunction, Ravel establishes a regular chronometer<sup>358</sup> consisting of quarter note triads, beginning first in the clarinets and moving gradually to other instruments; by contrasting shifting meters with steady, repetitive quarter-note rhythms, Ravel achieves rhythmic regularity within metric irregularity (Example 6.2).

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<sup>356</sup> Metric changes and irregular meters are not a new innovation for Ravel, who took a similar approach to rhythm and meter in his 1905 piano solo *Noctuelles*. He used the technique selectively, however, and his decision to organize *L'Heure's* meter in this manner reflects his continued interest in temporal play.

<sup>357</sup> With the orchestra playing at 72 to the quarter note, the clocks sound .555 times, 1.38 times, and 3.222 times respectively per beat.

<sup>358</sup> I take the term "chronometer" from Concepcion's comment about Ramiro in Scene 21: "As regular as a chronometer, this gentleman passes by my window with his mules every morning!" (Régulier comme un chronomètre/Monsieur passe avec ses mulets/Chaque matin, sous ma fenêtre!) R118/1-3.

Table 6.1 Phrase lengths and meters in overture to *L'Heure espagnole*.<sup>359</sup>

<i>Measure numbers</i>	<i>Meters</i>	<i>Phrase lengths in measures</i>
1-3	5/4, 5/4, 3/4	3
4-7	5/4, 5/4, 5/4, 3/4	4
8-10	5/4, 5/4, 5/4	3
11-13	5/4, 5/4, 3/4	3
14-17	5/4, 5/4, 6/4, 6/4	4
18-21	5/4, 5/4, 5/4, 5/4	4
22-27	3/4, 5/4, 3/4, 5/4, 3/4, 3/4	6 (sum of short, irregular phrases)
28-30	5/4, 5/4, 3/4	3
31-32	5/4, 3/4	2
33-34	6/4, 6/4	2
35-36	6/4, 6/4	2

**Example 6.2.** *L'Heure espagnole*, regular chronometer in irregular metric frame, mm. 1-4.

Cl. 3 2 3 2

Ob./Bn.

*pp*

B. cl.

*pp*

Vc./Cb. 3 2

*pppp* tr tr tr tr tr

<sup>359</sup> For the overture, I have numbered the measures for ease of reference.



Against the chronometric backdrop, Ravel introduces rhythmic patterns that conflict with the 3 + 2 metrical division established in the opening measures. The first such instance appears in measure eight (shown in Example 6.3), when the bassoons introduce a figure that oscillates between two dyads. The ear, which tends to simplify through grouping patterns, pairs the dyads, producing two simultaneous metric conflicts. First, the paired chords extend the pattern across one 5/4 measure and into another, which places the second, weaker dyad of one pair on the downbeat of measure nine. Meanwhile, the cellos, which continue to suggest a 3 + 2 grouping in measure eight, reverse course in measure nine, playing a 2 + 3 figure that is reinforced by the viola, horn, and sarrusophone entrances on beat three.

**Example 6.3. Conflicting rhythmic patterns and metric divisions, mm. 8-10.**

The musical score for measures 8-10 is written in 5/4 time. The staves are arranged vertically: Bassoon (Bn.), Viola (Va.), Horn (Hn.), and Cello (Vc.).

- Bassoon (Bn.):** Measures 8-10 feature a series of chords. Above the staff, four groups of two measures each are bracketed and labeled '2', indicating a 2+2+2+2 grouping across the three measures.
- Viola (Va.):** Measures 8-10 feature a series of chords. Above the staff, a bracket labeled '3 + 2' spans measures 8 and 9, indicating a 3+2 grouping.
- Horn (Hn.):** Measures 8-10 feature a series of chords. Above the staff, a bracket labeled '2 + 3' spans measures 8 and 9, indicating a 2+3 grouping.
- Cello (Vc.):** Measures 8-10 feature a series of chords. Above the staff, a bracket labeled '3 + 2' spans measures 8 and 9, indicating a 3+2 grouping.

The score illustrates the conflict between the 3+2 metrical division established in the opening measures and the 2+2+2+2 grouping introduced in measure eight.

The new metric emphasis on the third beat is reinforced by the sarrusophone's alternating quarter note figure, analogous to the bassoon's dyads. At the same time, however, Ravel undermines the strong third beat with the bassoon's rhythmic pattern, which places the weaker of the paired dyads on that beat. In measure 10, both the 3 + 2 and 2 + 3 metric divisions implied by the cellos drop out. The sarrusophone continues the bassoon's rhythmic pattern, playing an unstressed note on the downbeat of measure 10, while the horns enter on beats two and four, underscoring the sarrusophone's strong beats. Even while immersed in rhythmic and metric ambiguity, the steady quarter-note chronometer keeps ticking, continuing the theme of regularity within irregularity established in the opening measures.

Ravel heightens the metric conflict in measure 11 when the clarinets resume the role of chronometer, playing steady, triadic quarter notes against the 3 + 2 cello subdivision. A bell enters in the same measure with a repeated dotted-quarter rhythm syncopated against the chronometer, as seen in Example 6.4. As the 5/4 meter organizes an odd number of beats, the bell's simple repeated rhythm becomes a metric liability. When it first appears in measure 11, the bell falls on the offbeats of one and four; in measure twelve, the same rhythm lands on the offbeats of two and five.

**Example 6.4. Syncopation against regular chronometer, mm. 11-14.**

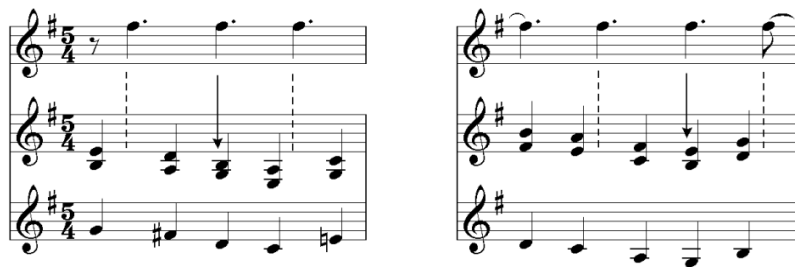
The musical score for measures 11-14 of the Overture to *The Rite of Spring* is shown. The score is in 5/4 time and features four staves: Bell, Cl. (Clarinet), B. cl. (Bass Clarinet), and Vc. (Violoncello). The Bell part is marked with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic and shows a syncopated rhythm in measure 13, where an eighth note is tied to a dotted quarter note. The Cl. part is marked with a *pp* dynamic and features a 3 + 2 metric division. The B. cl. part is marked with a *pp* dynamic and features a 3 + 2 metric division. The Vc. part is marked with a *pp* dynamic and features a 3 + 2 metric division. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Ravel shifts the bell's rhythm out of phase in measure 13 by lengthening its pattern by half a beat, tying an eighth note to the dotted quarter (Example 6.5). When the chronometer returns to its opening melodic motive in measure 14, the bell's alignment has shifted from its first appearance, synchronizing with the chronometer's fourth rather than third beat. In the same measure, a second bell enters, introducing half-note rhythms that bisect the measure into two-and-a-half beats, conflicting with the 3 + 2 metric division established in the first few bars of the overture and maintained through the occasional appearance of the cellos (see Examples 6.4 above).

Similar rhythmic and metric games—polyrhythms, syncopation, phase shifts, competing metric pulses and divisions—recur throughout the overture's 36 measures. Despite their variety, all of these musical procedures relate to conceptions of time as metronomic and divisible, perceived through numbers and proportion. Yet for a six-

measure interlude, Ravel's rhythmic and metric manipulations exchange a linear, numerical model of time for a disorienting temporal experience that favors a sense of musical time unmoored from meter altogether.

**Example 6.5. Phase shift in bells, from m. 11 (left) to m. 14 (right).**



Example 6.6 shows the chronometer, barely audible and appearing intermittently in the bassoons, maintaining the implied 3 + 2 division of 5/4; meanwhile, rhythms in the flute, cello, horn, and sarrusophone bisect the measure precisely. The solo horn plays triplets and tied rhythms, including an eighth note tied to a quarter note downbeat. While the passage has the makings of a metric patchwork, with its syncopated rhythms and competing subdivisions, it achieves quite a different effect. Awash in the sound of scalar clarinet flourishes, xylophone tremolos, and trills in the violins, violas, and cellos, the passage projects rhythmic stasis—or, alternatively, rhythmic circularity, with motives cycling in turn like cogs. What results is a shimmering concoction of timbres that hovers like a soporific cloud, undermining metric logic.

**Example 6.6. Illusory suspension of meter, mm. 23-25.**

The musical score for measures 23-25 is arranged in five systems. The first system contains the Flute (Fl.) and Bassoon (Bn.) parts. The Flute part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 5/4. It begins with a *pp* dynamic. The Bassoon part is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 5/4. It begins with a *p* dynamic. The second system contains the Horn (Hn.) and Violin II (Vln. II) parts. The Horn part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 5/4. It begins with a *p* dynamic. The Violin II part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 5/4. It begins with a *p* dynamic. The third system contains the Xylophone (Xy.) and Clarinet (Cl.) parts. The Xylophone part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 5/4. It begins with a *ppp* dynamic. The Clarinet part is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 5/4. It begins with a *p* dynamic. The fourth system contains the Violin II (Vln. II) part. The fifth system contains the Clarinet (Cl.) part. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings. There are also some annotations like 'tr' and '3' with arrows pointing to specific notes.

The temporal disorientation that Ravel delivers here depends on initial perceptions of time in the clockwork orchestra. For the first 21 measures of the overture, the listener experiences disorientation resulting from the interactions of rhythm with metric boundaries—just as in *Sérénade grotesque*, whose rhythmic insistence draws attention to meter as bounded space. After establishing this frame, Ravel is able to set subsequent metric and rhythmic disjunctions in relief; even slight irregularities become powerfully apparent when compared with “normal” discursive patterns.

By presenting Time in various guises, Ravel draws on different mechanisms of temporal perception. The chronometer evokes the constancy of the clock, each uniform quarter note ordered like the minutes on a clock face, never a minute longer

or shorter than the last. Yet the chronometer appears within an irregular metric framework: not only do the meters themselves change, but so do their relationships, as syncopations and polyrhythms suggest a reordering of metric subdivisions. Ravel's metric irregularities might be interpreted in a few ways: perhaps they resemble the individual's attempt to reconcile his own measuring of time with the chronometer of the clock, or maybe they evoke a model of time like Einstein's, in which the supremacy of the mechanism is undermined when clocks disagree on time measurements. In Bergsonian time, the efficacy of metric irregularity may depend upon the listener's ability to remember regularity: both exist simultaneously in the listener's consciousness.

While the rhythmic dialogue between the bells and the "ticking" in the clarinets offer an auditory snapshot of the sounds encountered in a clock shop, these rhythmic and metric relationships also figure modes of temporal perception. In several scenes, Ravel alternates tempi to represent characters' varying perceptions of time and their consequent inability to communicate with one another. One such instance occurs in Scene 4, when Concepcion's lover Gonzalve enters. A caricature of a poet, Gonzalve inhabits two worlds at once: the reality of the clock shop (to which he is oblivious) and the creative fantasia of his own mind. Arriving for his morning tryst, he spends time weaving vainglorious metaphors ("The Garden of Hours...sonnet!"), even as Concepcion urges him to leave his metaphorical oasis for a garden of earthly delights. Ravel sets Gonzalve's flowery vocalizing, which

introduces the scene, to a languid tempo marked *lent*; subsequent tempi in this scene appear in Table 6.2.

Concepcion opens Scene 4 with a bit more urgency, shifting to *au mouvement* as she exclaims, “About time, here’s Gonzalve!” On cue, Gonzalve launches into a serenade that initially seems like foreplay, singing about the best day of the week—the day when Torquemada is away on business. His tempo, for the moment, matches Concepcion’s. As she presses Gonzalve not to waste time (*modéré—modérément animé*), Gonzalve sinks from a moderate tempo to a slow, disengaged pace (R16), slipping from *très modéré* to *très ralenti*, and finally to *lent*. At R17, Concepcion twice remarks that the muleteer will return, as her tempi—*modéré animé*, *modérément*, *en pressant peu à peu*—reflect her heightened sense of urgency. Each time, Gonzalve continues to spin his poetry in response, sinking to a slow, disengaged pace (*lent*).

Concepcion switches tactics by trying to reach Gonzalve in his tempo, shifting from *modéré* (at R19) to *plus lent* two measures later. Gonzalve responds by adopting Concepcion’s previous *modéré* at rehearsal 20—finally arriving at her proffered tempo, but several measures too late. Concepcion, sensing her opportunity slipping away, decides to meet Gonzalve’s *modéré* (R21), sounding a warning as she does: “Yes, my friend, but time flies, take care. Time is pitilessly rationed to us.” Predictably, Gonzalve misses his last chance, obviously slipping from *modéré* to conclude his serenade in the *lent* with which he first entered the scene, unable to strike a temporal accord.

**Table 6.2. Fluctuating tempi in Scene 4, compared with Concepcion and Gonzalve's texts**

Concepcion's Text	Tempo	Gonzalve's Text	R. no.
	<i>Lent</i>	Vocalizing on "ah"	R15
About time, here's Gonzalve!	<i>au Mouvement</i>		
		At last the day so sweet returns...	
Yes, my friend...let's hurry, let's not waste time in idle words...	<i>Modéré—Modérément animé</i>		R16
	<i>Très modéré—très ralenti</i>	The enamel of these dials which decorate your home...	
	<i>Lent—Rall.—Lent</i>	...It's the garden of my joy...	
Yes, my friend...the muleteer will return.	<i>Modérément animé</i>		R17
	<i>Rall.—Lent</i>	This metaphor is so poetic!...	
If the muleteer returns! Yes, my friend, but let's profit from our only hour...	<i>Modéré—En pressant peu à peu</i>		
	<i>Lent—Retenez—Même mouvement</i>	A clock, it is your heart, its rhythm is the same,...	R18
Yes, my friend, but see, the time has come to realize the lovely dream...	<i>Modéré—Plus lent</i>		R19
	<i>Modéré</i>	The kisses that your lips invite...	R20
Yes, my friend, but time flies, take care....	<i>Modéré</i>		R21
	<i>Lent</i>	<i>Le Carillon des Amours...</i> serenade!	
And now, here's the muleteer!	<i>Modérément animé</i>		

Ravel's *Sérénade grotesque* provides an intertextual perspective on precisely how Gonzalve's serenade went wrong. In terms of stylistic norms, Gonzalve did everything "right": he used a compound meter (6/8), a moderate to slow tempo (*au mouvement*, followed by *lent*), a soft dynamic (*pianissimo*), and plucked, arpeggiated accompaniment on a string instrument (the harp). His text matched reasonably well



with the serenades examined in Chapter V by opening with an exclamation of longing (“At last, the day so sweet returns...”). When Gonzalve diverged into abstract territory, he adopted a tried-and-true tactic common to the Chausson and Chabrier serenades, in which the lover woos the beloved through flowery metaphor. Concepcion, however, is not the sort of woman who is beguiled by circumlocution, and Gonzalve, despite observing the musical and textual norms of the serenade, finds his own composition wanting.

In *Sérénade grotesque*, Ravel sandwiches the serenade melody between sections of marked rhythmic and metric instability, indicating—perhaps without irony—that this melody is to be played *très sentimental*. Despite the agitated context from which the serenade emerges, it manages to invoke the charm, introspection, and lyricism typical of its genre. Ravel’s parody of the serenade occurs largely through the manipulation of his listener’s expectations: juxtaposing themes of incongruous character; littering the piece with rhythmically unstable themes, unusual meters and tempi; making the listener wait for the serenade, which finally enters in measure 57; and overwhelming the serenade with contrasting material that occupies 130 of the work’s 158 measures. For Gonzalve, however, Ravel creates a textbook serenade for a scenario that ruthlessly exposes its insufficiency, making the parody situational rather than stylistic. The one aspect of Gonzalve’s serenade that diverges from the norm—his lapses into unduly slow tempi—reveals his sexual inadequacy as he repeatedly steers his poetic seduction off course.

Concepcion fares slightly better with Inigo in Scene 12. When she first spots Inigo inside the clock, he introduces himself with characteristic pomp and circumstance in a tempo marked *très modéré et majestueux* (R57/4).<sup>360</sup> As she rebuffs Inigo's clumsy advances (R57-59), the tempo veers from *animé* to *modéré* and back, the quicker tempi generally aligning with Concepcion's agitated mood (see Table 6.3). When Inigo gradually slips from *modéré* (R58) to *lent* (R61), he initiates a new appeal that catches Concepcion's attention: though he may lack "youth and poetry," at least he has worldly experience. Concepcion assents, replying in the same languorous tempo, "That's true!" Encouraged, Inigo dips even slower, to *très lent* (R62), embroidering the same theme: "And poets, busily pursuing airy dreams, forget that reality passes under their noses..." With Gonzalve's visit fresh in her mind, Concepcion says, "If you knew how truly you speak!" (R63) As she agrees with Inigo, Concepcion adapts her quicker temporal pace to his, interjecting her dialogue into Inigo's *très lent*.

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<sup>360</sup> His dotted-rhythm theme, as many commentators have noted, is reminiscent of the peacock's in Ravel's *Histoires naturelles*.

**Table 6.3. Comparison of Concepcion and Inigo's tempi and texts, Scene 12.**

Concepcion's Text	Tempo	Inigo's Text	R. no.
Stop fooling around, Don Inigo, you're mad!	<i>Très modéré et majestueux</i>	You have before you Don Inigo Gomez,...and I would even be on my knees...	R57/4
	<i>Animé</i>	...if I weren't out of room...	
	<i>Modéré</i>	Yes, mad about you, my pretty one!... This is just the beginning....	R58
But I want no more of this!...And I insist, come out of that bizarre lodging!	<i>Animé</i>		R59
	<i>Même mouvement—Ralentissez peu à peu</i>	What! When I had so much trouble getting in, must I already get out?...	R60
	<i>Lent—Cédez</i>	In your imagination, do I lack youth and poetry?...	R61
	<i>Plus lent</i>	Excessive youth has its bad side: a young man is often inexperienced!	
That's true, that's true!			
	<i>Ralentissez—Très lent</i>	A trifle upsets and embarrasses him!...And poets,...forget that reality passes beneath their noses...	R62
If you only knew how truly you speak!			R63
		A suitor like me offers more to love!	

### Disjunction: Musical, Textual, and Temporal

At times, the relationship Ravel establishes between text and music seems contrived, even glib, perhaps communicating the meaning of the text too literally. Ravel establishes this relationship early in the opera, especially in the first few scenes. When Ramiro enters in Scene 1 and remarks that his watch has stopped, the chronometer marking time in the low strings halts and the last of the three ticking clocks drops out. In the same scene, Ramiro relates the story of his uncle, the

toreador, as stereotypically “Spanish” rhythms appear in the orchestra. Gonzalve’s line in Scene 4, “Let harps sing,” is conspicuously accompanied by harps. Though Ravel has been criticized for relying on gimmicks, making the composer “too clever for his own good”<sup>361</sup> in the words of one commentator, these exceedingly harmonious unions between music and text are undermined at key points in the narrative. Ravel’s witty subversions may only be recognized once “normal” patterns of correspondence between music, character, and text have been established.

Occasional instances of musical-textual incongruity, analogous to the conflicting temporal relationships in the overture, typically contradict or disrupt a character’s words or gestures. At the conclusion of Scene 2, for example, Torquemada prepares to leave for the morning to regulate the town clocks, remarking, “Official time doesn’t wait” (shown in Example 6.7). Ravel dramatically reduces the orchestral texture, writing sustained chords for the low brass that patiently hover as Torquemada as delivers his line, complete with a *ritard* at the phrase’s end. Similarly, when the corpulent Inigo decides to hide himself in a clock in Scene 9, Ravel accompanies his awkward efforts with an unlikely choice—a lilting waltz. In an extended soliloquy in Scene 17, “Oh! le pitoyable aventure,” Concepcion hurls insults at both of her feckless lovers, lamenting the sexual decline of her countrymen (“And these men call themselves Spaniards!”)<sup>362</sup> Her textual refrain, “Time drags,

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<sup>361</sup> Nichols, “*L’Heure espagnole*.” Ravel has been charged with this criticism both in his time and our own; Manuel Rosenthal’s assessment of the unfavorable complexity in *L’Heure*, quoted above, offers an example of the former.

<sup>362</sup> Smith sees French perceptions of Spain as a land of decadence, genetic degeneration, and political decline reflected both in the opera generally and Concepcion’s lament in particular. For Smith,

drags, drags” is accompanied by an animated, accelerating figure in the orchestra that concludes with a *fortississimo* flourish marked *au mouvement*. The music indicates that time is inexorable, pressing ahead without acknowledging or conforming to individual perceptions.

**Example 6.7. Musical time waits as Gonzalve delivers his line, R11/1-6.**

The musical score for Example 6.7 consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, 3/8 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and the lyrics "L'heure of - fi - ci - elle n'at - tend pas." The word "Cédez" is written above the final measure. The middle staff is for a tuba (labeled "Tb.") in bass clef, 3/8 time, with a key signature of one sharp. It features a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and contains sustained chords. The bottom staff is for a tuba (labeled "Tuba") in bass clef, 3/8 time, with a key signature of one sharp. It also features a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and contains sustained chords. The music illustrates a moment where the vocal line is held while the orchestral accompaniment continues.

The fact that the opera unfolds in real time—*L'Heure espagnole* takes just under an hour to perform—supports the view that while temporal discontinuities may exist between Ravel's characters, clock time, like the condition of mortality, persists without change. At the same time, this temporal persistence undergirds the irony of Torquemada's pronouncement that "official time doesn't wait," delivered as the orchestra waits patiently, exempt from time's inexorable flow. Torquemada's small but pivotal role extends beyond pithy irony, however, for it typifies the temporal tug of war central both to the Einstein-Bergson debate and the work's grotesque effect.

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Concepcion's line, "And these men call themselves Spaniards!"—*Et ces gens-là se disent Espagnols!*—communicates her own desire and power while claiming that Spanish men are "unfit to represent their country." See "Ravel's Operatic Spectacles," 191.

Special relativity states that time must be considered from a particular point of reference: time measured with respect to a moving body differs from that associated with a stationary body, even if the devices measuring time are faultlessly accurate and perfectly synchronized. The differing perceptions of time among *L'Heure's* characters seem like an artistic analogue to this theory, with each character experiencing time according to his or her point of view.

It is Bergson's theory of time, however, that more effectively accommodates the temporal disjunctions experienced by the characters, for whom time exists as a process of consciousness and memory. Within *L'Heure's* clock shop, four characters participate in a play of triviality that elevates dry wit and farce to high art. The characters' experiences, motivations, and desires govern their perception of time, and hence, their time flow or *durée*: Concepcion senses time passing all too quickly, while Gonzalve constructs a time bubble with poetic metaphors. The time marked by the shop's clocks seems irrelevant to the time experienced by Concepcion, who wants to take advantage of her free hour; to Gonzalve, who wants to weave metaphors; and to Ramiro, the taciturn muleteer, who anxiously awaits Torquemada's return. For each character, the time passed in Ravel's "Spanish hour" is not a homogeneous, discrete unit of measure comparable to the hour that it precedes and follows. The opera's musical time mirrors the characters' disjunct perceptions of time flow through a flexible approach to rhythm, tempo, and metric organization.

One of Bergson's primary complaints about special relativity was the way it made time simply another dimension of the physical world rather than a product of

human consciousness. To spatialize time is, in Bergson's view, to abstract it, making time divisible into units that can be removed from and integrated back into the whole, just as a point on a line may be perceived independently from its position. In *L'Heure*, Torquemada's occupation is to regulate the town clocks, an activity that the audience and the other characters never see; after a brief appearance in the opening, Torquemada is not heard from until he returns from his rounds in the opera's final ten minutes. His time is spatialized, abstract time writ large: unseen, removed from the experiences of the other characters, and associated with the visual and spatial symbol of time, the clock. He departs for work because Concepcion reminds him of the time; he returns after his watch indicates that an hour has passed.

The understanding of time is conditioned not only by differing perceptual mechanisms but also by the symbols attached to those mechanisms. If the clock is the primary device for measuring and organizing Western time, then its metaphorical associations with death may be extended to perceptions of time itself: imagine, as Baudelaire and Poe did, Father Time standing in for the Grim Reaper. Besides the identification of clocks with mortality, the phenomenon of clock time itself encourages perceptions of time's beginning and ending, rather than its continual flow. Each hour on a clock enacts the microcosmic birth, life, and death of time as the new hour waxes, then wanes before extinguishing in the final minute. The fact that Torquemada is scarcely seen in the opera dehumanizes him, facilitating a perceptual link between Torquemada and the clocks he so diligently regulates. If the clock is indeed a symbol of the transient human condition, then Torquemada, the clock

administrator, is an agent of mortality. Perhaps it is for this reason that Torquemada, of all the characters, is able to manipulate time, reveling in unhurried self-indulgence on the line, “Official time does not wait.” As the figure responsible for the clock time of Toledo, Torquemada *is* the official time—and for the moment, time hovers at his whim.

In *L'Heure*, the presence of clocks similarly makes persistent reference to “chronological” or “public” time, which the characters presume to share even as they carve out times distinct from one another, marked musically by different tempi.<sup>363</sup> Most interactions between characters—and indeed, most soliloquies as well—make use of frequent tempo shifts and subtle fluctuations that prevent the opera from settling into the chronometric regularity of a clock: irregularity is its most regular feature. As with Poe’s “Maelström,” the grotesque in *L'Heure* emerges in part through a cumulative *vertige* enacted through multiple, conflicting temporal perspectives. Concepcion’s temporal experience is a special case, for she, of all the characters, recognizes the grotesque in her rival suitors, and thus explicitly links the phenomenon with the temporal disjunctions introduced in the overture and later expanded in the seduction scenes. It is not only the words and manners of her suitors that render them grotesque, but also the *vertige* of temporal discord that plagues her interactions with them.

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<sup>363</sup> The terms “chronological time” and “public time” are borrowed from Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Ricoeur notes that chronological time—marked by clocks and bells—is not an absolute measurement but a marker against which the characters measure and understand their experiences. See *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 105.



Unlike Inigo, who drops by the shop, Gonzalve plans his visit: Concepcion is expecting him. In Scene 17, when she expresses revulsion towards both suitors, the audience may wonder about her relationship with Gonzalve, for whom she had previously felt affection (or lust): is it his behavior that has changed, or Concepcion's perception of him? For a moment, the opera's doggedly present tense admits reflection, change, and a sense of past. Pierre Nora describes the relationship between temporality and memory with a physical metaphor evoking space: "For a sense of the past there had to be a 'before' and an 'after,' a chasm had to intervene between the present and the past."<sup>364</sup> From this chasm, which marks the site of a temporal rupture, the grotesque emerges—the byproduct of temporal displacement. As Concepcion assesses Gonzalve in her soliloquy, her present self corrects the judgment of her past; the "grotesque" Gonzalve becomes fully apparent to her once time and experience efface her past impressions.

Reflecting on her piteous state, Concepcion's tempos change with greater rapidity than any other scene in the opera, averaging a new tempo every one to two measures (see Table 6.4). In a work already characterized by frequent tempo shifts, Concepcion's unstable pace threatens to unmoor the opera's clockwork underpinnings. Metric order continues to reign, however, with the bassline clearly articulating beats one and four in a constant 6/8—another reminder of the boundaries necessary for transgression to exert its power. It is only appropriate that the moment when Concepcion recognizes the grotesque in her midst (in the form of Inigo and

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<sup>364</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux des Mémoires*," *Representations* 26 (April 1989): 16.

Gonzalve), her temporal experience recalls Ravel’s treatment of time in the overture: regular and irregular, predictable and surprising, subject to fluctuation and inexorably constant.

**Table 6.4. Tempi in Scene 17, with each cell representing one measure.**

<b>R83</b>				<b>R84</b>			
<i>Modéré</i>	<i>Ral.</i>	<i>Très lent—Ral.</i>	<i>Au Mouvt</i>	<i>Pressez—Ral.</i>	<i>Pressez</i>	<i>Animé</i>	<i>Au Mouvt—Ral.</i>

<b>R85</b>			<b>R86</b>		
<i>Très lent</i>	<i>Au Mouvt</i>	<i>Pressez</i>	<i>Au Mouvt—Pressez beaucoup</i>	<i>Au Mouvt—Ral.</i>	<i>Très lent</i>

<b>R87</b>				
<i>Au Mouvt—Retenu</i>	<i>Au Mouvt</i>	<i>Un peu plus lent—Ral.</i>	<i>Au Mouvt</i>	<i>A tempo rubato</i>

<b>R88</b>			<b>R89</b>	
<i>Au Mouvt—Pressez beaucoup</i>	<i>Au Mouvt</i>	<i>Pressez</i>	<i>Animé</i>	<i>Très lent</i>

Ultimately, Concepcion rejects both of her suitors: “The one wants to apply himself to composing extravagant verses, and the other, even more grotesque, could get only half out of the clock, with his paunch entangled in the fobs!”<sup>365</sup> When Concepcion describes Inigo as “even more grotesque” than Gonzalve (thus tacitly acknowledging that Gonzalve is also a grotesque), her characterization evokes the grotesque as an interpretive process in a manner similar to Callot, whose *Balli di Sfessani* included the painstakingly rendered figures of spectators that call attention to the act of viewing and interpreting—central both to works of art generally and the grotesque in particular. Concepcion’s temporal disjunction has particular relevance for the audience, for in identifying the grotesques that inhabit the opera, she models and articulates the perceptions of viewers.

If Torquemada represents Ricoeur’s “monumental time”—the “official” time of authority and power that governs all other forms—then Concepcion embodies his rival, as she creates and is subject to the temporal fluxes of those around her. At the same time, she mirrors the experience of the audience, for whom the opera’s hour-long performance unfolds through the fractured temporal trajectories of the characters. Through much of the opera, the male characters interact with Concepcion rather than each other, for she is the center of time’s maelstrom, enacting for the audience the vertiginous temporal experience that triggers the grotesque.

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<sup>365</sup> “L’un ne veut mettre ses efforts/Qu’à composer des vers baroques/Et l’autre, plus grotesque encor/  
De l’horloge n’a pu sortir rien qu’à mi-corps/Avec son ventre empêtré de breloques!...” R86/2-6.

### ***L'Heure's Grotesque Effect***

The critical response to *L'Heure*, as discussed above, was mixed. If the opera fell short for critics like Bellaigue and Carraud, it typically did so through unrealized comic potential. The stage play had all the makings of a glittering, farcical romp, its characters lithely blending wit and wordplay with a slapstick physicality. The music, however, establishes a very different character from its opening measures, where no human characters are to be found. Instead, the audience encounters onstage clocks complemented by impassive orchestral machinery that marks varied manifestations of time.

In the opera's very first scene are moments of musical-textual agreement: the musical chronometer stopping on Ramiro's line, "My watch stopped," or Ramiro's description of his toreador uncle underscored orchestrally with Spanish rhythms. Such moments were surely overshadowed, for some, by Ravel's outsized orchestra, which seemed better suited to Wagnerian pathos than a trifling musical bon-bon. The composer's incongruous musical-textual combinations, like the *accelerando* accompanying Concepcion's "Time drags," failed to capitalize on opportunities for comic text painting. No wonder certain critics asked why Ravel refused to play along with the farce.

To understand the nature of Ravel's aesthetic achievement in *L'Heure* is to question the role that criticism may play in formulating an assessment of the work. Upon reviewing the response to *L'Heure*, we may ask whether Ravel's musical-textual contradictions should be viewed a misguided conceit or an ironic triumph, or

to what degree Koechlin may have been right when he noted that *L'Heure* falls short dramatically because its cardboard characters fail to arouse our sympathies. When considering a work with a “mixed” reception history, it is easy to lose sight of aesthetic concerns amidst the smoke and noise of critical conflict. Even a comprehensive study of the response to *L'Heure* would ultimately result in the same questions that dogged Ravel’s contemporaries at the work’s premiere. Contradiction is a part of *L'Heure*’s reception history because it is inherently a part of the opera itself.

If the critical disagreement stemmed from confusion over *L'Heure*’s status as a comedy, as some have claimed, then the work breaks down when compared with achievements in the same genre.<sup>366</sup> Similarly, perceptions of *L'Heure*’s ill-fitting orchestral garb raises questions about Ravel’s aesthetic acumen: his pairing of comedy with orchestral mass and leitmotiv proved a misfire for many critics. If, however, the contradictions in Ravel’s opera are manifestations of the grotesque, they simultaneously justify the division among critics and reconcile their disagreement—paradoxically by refusing to reconcile.

No critic considered here used the word “grotesque” to describe *L'Heure*’s première. Some evoked the phenomenon through synonyms, characterizing the work as “burlesque” and pointing out its exaggerated, parodic qualities. In describing the “arabesque” quality of Franc-Nohain’s verse, Henri Ghéon references a phenomenon

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<sup>366</sup> Huebner considers this argument by suggesting variations on Franc-Nohain’s character and text that would offer “comedy with a softer edge,” embracing the buoyant spirit that reigns in comic works. See “*Laughter*,” 227-228.

that shares many points of contact, both aesthetically and historically, with the grotesque.<sup>367</sup> Yet it should come as no surprise that critics acknowledged *L'Heure's* contradictions, exaggerations, parodies, and even arabesques without identifying the grotesque, which thrives on uncertainty and the suspension of meaning. Were it easy to identify or define, it would lose both its transgressive nature and its expressive power.

In the title of the opera, we grasp the unity of the work among the materials of its rupture, for the hour unifies as it divides. Like the symmetrical phrases and forms of Mozart, *L'Heure's* global disjunction may be glimpsed in the individual phrase. Alternating, irregular meters in the overture, which mark divisions of musical time, are harnessed to the steady quarter-note note ticking of the chronometer. In Ravel's music, Time ticks by with the automated precision of the clock, even as it flows through consciousness like a stream that exists in the mind only; though we experience both modes of perception, we find that they are in contradiction with one another.

Through Time's symbol, the clock, we are given the disjunctive union of human and machine, each alienated from its own kind by taking on attributes of the other. As characters embody mechanisms through metaphor, gesture, and music, they reach beyond the bio-mechanical hybrid to encompass the very nature of life, and by extension, the boundary distinguishing life from death. These thematic dualities

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<sup>367</sup> "Sur la bouffonnerie de M. Franc-Nohain, plus drôle dans les gestes que dans les mots, c'est miracle de voir quelles arabesques gratuites et pourtant aisées, calquées sur la parole et pourtant mélodiques, savent bondir et reprendre terre; comment un art si concerté, si soucieux de la qualité des moyens, joue le plus parfait naturel." Henri Ghéon, "L'Heure espagnole," *La Nouvelle revue française* 5 (1 July 1911): 136-137.

generate others, from musical-textual contradictions to dual modes of temporal perception. Each refracts another, altering relationships and forming new dualities.

The ruptures in *L'Heure* may be found not only in the work's opposing dualities, but in its collapsing of them: the transgressive relationship sought by the "clockwork" Inigo becomes nothing more than a union of two automatons, considering Concepcion's own metaphorically hybrid status. Though Ravel questions the hegemony of clock time through fluctuating musical tempi, he does so with music that obeys a clockwork order of its own: notes whose length depends on numbers and proportion, arranged in meters that segment time into discrete units. Time, the single theme that unifies Ravel's opera, simultaneously fragments it. While *L'Heure's* grotesque may be seen through character, text, and musical moments, its fugitive character requires that we look beyond the sum of its parts—knowing that as we look, pieces will shift and light will spill into the corners, its very illumination creating new shadows.

## CHAPTER VII

### *DAPHNIS ET CHLOÉ: ILLUSION, INVERSION, AND GROTESQUE*

#### METAMORPHOSIS

After drafting *L'Heure espagnole* at a sprinter's pace, Ravel's next major stage work, *Daphnis et Chloé*, required as much endurance as speed. Apart from the project's grand scale, Ravel's challenges ranged from precarious contract negotiations to a contentious collaboration with Sergei Diaghilev and Michel Fokine,<sup>368</sup> compounded by a language barrier that Ravel described with the latter:

I must tell you that I've just had an insane week: preparation of a ballet libretto for the next Russian season. Almost every night, I was working until 3 A.M. What complicates things is that Fokine doesn't know a word of French, and I only know how to swear in Russian. Despite the interpreters, you can imagine the flavor of these discussions.<sup>369</sup>

The Greek novel *Daphnis and Chloe*, written by Longus in the second century C.E., provided the source for Fokine's preliminary 1907 scenario, which was accompanied

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<sup>368</sup> Deborah Mawer describes these various disagreements in *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel: Creation and Interpretation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 79-83.

<sup>369</sup> Ravel to Madame René de Saint-Marceaux, Paris, 27 June 1909, in *Ravel Reader*, 107. "Il faut vous dire que je viens de passer une semaine folle: préparation d'un livret de ballet destiné à la prochaine saison russe. A peu près tous les soirs, travail jusqu'à 3 h. du matin. Ce qui complique les choses, Fokine ne sait pas un mot de français. Je ne sais que jurer en russe. Malgré les interprètes, vous imaginez la saveur de ces entretiens." See *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 105.



by a statement of reform that figured ballet as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: costumes, musical style, choreography, and aesthetic effect should be renewed and explicitly coordinated.<sup>370</sup> Fokine observed Ravel's sympathy with his choreographic aims early in their collaboration, noting as assets both the composer's relative inexperience with traditional ballet and his familiarity with the choreographer's style, which avoided the "polkas, pizzicatos, waltzes, and galops" of the "old ballet."<sup>371</sup> After Ravel received the commission from Diaghilev sometime in 1909, however, he tinkered with Fokine's scenario, using as his source Jacques Amyot's sixteenth-century French translation of *Daphnis*.<sup>372</sup>

The Ravel/Fokine scenario presents the efflorescing love of Daphnis and Chloé and its various obstacles—jealousy, romantic rivals, and kidnapping by pirates. In the ballet's first part, Daphnis and Chloé are first seen near the conclusion of a devotional dance for the three Nymphs, whose figures are represented by a sculpture carved from the rock of an ancient grotto. As the girls performing the dance shift their attention from the Nymphs to Daphnis, Chloé feels jealous of her childhood friend for the first time; Daphnis tastes the same bitter medicine when Dorcon, a cowherd, gains Chloé's attention and petitions her for a kiss. Daphnis shoves Dorcon aside and the crowd diffuses the tension, separating the rivals and suggesting a dance

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<sup>370</sup> Michel Fokine, *Fokine: Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, trans. Vitale Fokine, ed. Anatole Chujoy (London: Constable, 1961), 71-72. Fokine suggested eliminating "numbers" in favor of continuous music and story, matching costumes to the era of the ballet's scenario, and withholding applause during the action in order to maintain the "scenic illusion."

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>372</sup> For an account of disagreements between Ravel and Fokine over the scenario, see Mawer, *Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, 84-89.

contest between them, with a kiss from Chloé awarded to the victor. Dorcon performs his grotesque dance first, followed by Daphnis's light and graceful dance, which wins the contest and the reward. The crowd chases off Dorcon and exits with Chloé, leaving Daphnis to ponder the mystery and euphoria of newly discovered love. Lyceion enters to perform a seductive dance, strategically disrobing by dropping a veil here and there, but the effect is ultimately blunted by Daphnis's distracted indifference. After Lyceion leaves, Daphnis hears battle cries and runs off, concerned that Chloé might be in peril. When he happens upon Chloé's sandal and realizes his worst fears, he collapses before the grotto, cursing the gods who had failed to protect his beloved. The three Nymphs carved in the rock face descend from their pedestals and perform a slow and mysterious dance before invoking the god Pan, to whom Daphnis appeals for help.

Part two takes place near a seacoast at the pirate camp, where Chloé is brought before Bryaxis, the pirate leader, who demands that she perform a dance. As Bryaxis carries Chloé off to rape her, the atmosphere suddenly transforms: satyrs, flares, and fantastical creatures encroach upon the camp, a chasm opens, and Pan's shadow appears, causing the pirates to flee. In part three, which returns to the landscape of part one, dawn stirs as Daphnis slumbers; when he wakes, he is reunited with Chloé, whose new headgear—a wreath—indicates Pan's intervention on her behalf. To pay tribute to the god, Daphnis and Chloé pantomime the myth of Pan and Syrinx; following this number, the ballet closes with a general dance that recaps many of the work's primary themes.

### Dorcon's "Danse grotesque"

Little attention has been paid to the "Danse grotesque," perhaps because it lacks the sensuous melodic curves and lush orchestral palette more typical of *Daphnis et Chloé*. As a character dance, its broad comic thrust establishes Dorcon as a fool and a social pariah; described as "le danseur bouffe" in the libretto distributed to the audience, Dorcon's character may be a descendent from opera buffa—a sort of eurhythmic Osmin.<sup>373</sup> When the ballet premiered at the Théâtre du Châtelet on June 8, 1912, few critics commented specifically on Dorcon's dance. Robert Brussel spoke for most when he described Dorcon as "silly and ridiculous," and his grotesque dance "clumsy"—remarks that pigeonhole the cowherd as the farcical heavy. With Dorcon painted in such broad strokes, there would seem to be little opportunity for the grotesque's subtly disorienting *vertige*. Brussel nevertheless twice associates the grotesque with Dorcon.<sup>374</sup> Louis Laloy considers the "Danse grotesque" the only one in a profusion of dances that effectively portrays its character and situation,<sup>375</sup> which somehow suggests compatibility between the grotesque and the dance's plainly comic nature.

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<sup>373</sup> Michael Puri, "Dandy, Interrupted: Sublimation, Repression, and Self-Portraiture in Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909-1912)," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60 (Summer 2007): 327.

<sup>374</sup> Brussel, who states that he was able to devote a little study to the work, refers to each dance with the titles that appear in the score, which is why he describes Dorcon's dance as grotesque. Brussel thus did not establish the link between Dorcon and the grotesque, though he lends it the legitimacy of his belief by making reference to it, and by choosing not to question Ravel and Fokine's characterization of the dance. See Brussel, "Les Théâtres [review of *Daphnis et Chloé*]," *Le Figaro* (9 June 1912).

<sup>375</sup> Louis Laloy, "La Musique [review of *Daphnis et Chloé*]," *La Grande revue* 73 (25 June 1912): 848. "A l'exception de la danse grotesque, elles demeurent peu caractérisées, d'autant que la musique ne supplée pas au défaut de l'argument."

The “Danse grotesque” may be divided into two primary themes accompanied throughout by a small battery of percussion: triangle, timpani, tambourine, bass drum, and snare drum. Bassoons introduce the first theme with innocuous major and minor triads, incongruously strung together in a chain to make them sound more novel than they truly are (see Example 7.1).

**Example 7.1.** *Daphnis et Chloé*, “Danse grotesque,” first theme, R32/3-10.

The musical score for Example 7.1 consists of two systems. The first system shows the Bassoon (Bn.) staff in 2/4 time, starting with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. It plays a series of chords and triads. The Timpani (Timp.) staff plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second system shows the Bn. staff playing a more complex, chromatic line, while the Timp. staff continues its rhythmic pattern. The Bn. staff in the second system is marked with a piano (p) dynamic.

A thematic repetition in the horns leads to the second theme, comprised of two motives (Example 7.2): Motive A is descending, slinky, and chromatic, while Motive B is mostly scalar and rhythmically labored, accompanied by the hammering of thirteen successive sixteenth notes. The two themes alternate with variations in orchestration and accompaniment, finally arriving at the dance’s comic climax: a statement of Motive B, altered slightly to accommodate a boorish glissando in the trombones, and followed by a rhythmic stutter scattered across the orchestra—the

musical equivalent of a pratfall (Example 7.3). The crowd, which mimics Dorcon's gestures, is accompanied by a heavy-handed musical parody of his second theme, marked *pesant* and orchestrated with cumbersome mass. When the crowd dissolves into laughter, Ravel's cartoonish mimesis is apparent in the series of squawking staccato eighth notes, each preceded by a grace note.

**Example 7.2. Motives A and B in “Danse grotesque,” second theme, R34/1-6.**

The musical score for Example 7.2 is divided into two sections: Motive A and Motive B. Motive A is played by the Flute/Oboe (FL./Ob.) and Violin I (Vln. I) in 2/4 time. Motive B is played by the Violin I/II (Vln. I/II) and Flute/Clarinet/Trombone (FL./Cl./Tpt.). The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *mf*, *ff*, and *p*.

**Example 7.3. Glissandi and rhythmic stutters in Motive B's climax, R40/1-4.**

The musical score for Example 7.3 shows the climax of Motive B. It includes parts for the Flute/Piccolo/Violin I (FL./Pic./Vl.), Flute/Clarinet (FL./Cl.), Trumpet/Tuba (Tr./Tuba), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass/Harp (Cb./Harp). The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, and *gliss.*

Michael Puri identifies Dorcon's dance as Turkish janissary music—the only example of its kind by Ravel—noting its characteristic percussive instrumentation, modal shifts, anapest (short-short-long) rhythms, and a march-like 2/4 meter. Since Ravel's style sometimes resembles a musical curio cabinet, his “janissary” music need not necessarily be figurative; Puri, however, suggests that it functions as a caricature of the Other, further enhancing the juxtaposition of Dorcon and his courtly rival, Daphnis, whose “Danse légère et gracieuse” immediately follows Dorcon's grotesque dance. If the dances are interpreted in opposition—“good” and “bad” music—then the dance contest may transcend its dramatic circumstances, projecting aesthetic commentary onto the characters' romantic rivalry.<sup>376</sup>

There is no question that Dorcon's music is “bad” by almost any standard. Disjointed harmonic progressions, vulgar orchestral effects, and relentless rhythmic stomping reveal both Ravel's primitivist characterization of Dorcon and the cultivated incompetence required to produce it. Yet the dance is not merely awkward, primitive, or aesthetically displeasing: it is *démodé*—old-fashioned and rather conventional, especially when compared with Ravel's recent work on *L'Heure espagnole*. In *L'Heure*, Ravel had appropriated eighteenth-century operatic and Wagnerian conventions, enmeshing them to produce a comical critique of both; his parodies involved games with temporality and evolving relationships between music and text that were alternately congruent and contradictory.

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<sup>376</sup> Puri, “Dandy, Interrupted,” 328-29, 353.

Here, Ravel portrays Dorcon's graceless choreographic misfire with meandering phrases and strange harmonic combinations. The dance's musical mishaps are both dramatically transparent and conventionally unconventional: ineptitude conveyed through the willful neglect of harmonic structures. Mozart had employed similar techniques in *Ein musikalischer Spass*, a work that limns the felicitous blunders which might result from an indifferent musical education: directionless phrases, flawed chord progressions, stylistic incongruities, and structural mishaps. Mozart's last chord of the final movement—a chaotic polytonal cluster—is an instance of pure musical slapstick<sup>377</sup> much like Ravel's crass trombone glissandi, which require neither musical knowledge nor maturity to appreciate. At the conclusion of Dorcon's dance, the crowd's musical response is a parody worthy of its shopworn target: more of the same, only bigger, louder, and performed with greater pedantic weight. The musical gaffes in the "Danse grotesque," while entertaining and effective, are scarcely novel. Though their very conventionality supports the notion that Ravel intended the dance as a caricature of contemporary aesthetic posturing, they offer none of the transgression or disjunction suggestive of the grotesque.

Besides its banal slapstick comedy, other problems loom for the "Danse grotesque": namely rhythm and meter, which help establish and challenge expectations in *Sérénade grotesque* and *L'Heure espagnole*. In both works, Ravel evokes the grotesque partly through metric saturation, creating regularity either by

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<sup>377</sup> This is the description that Irving Godt applies, most appropriately, to the chord. Godt offers an analytical overview of all four movements in "Mozart's Real Joke," *College Music Symposium* 26 (1986): 27-41.

stringing together several measures in the same meter (as in the opening of *Sérénade grotesque*) or creating patterns of change that generate uniformity through repetition (like the overture of *L'Heure espagnole*). Once the listener accepts the boundaries of a meter or metric pattern, Ravel upsets expectations by introducing disruptive rhythms and meters, which transgress temporal boundaries without effacing them—or, alternatively, reveals porous areas where boundaries are believed to exist, but do not. The disruptive material in both works consists of ambiguous metric subdivisions, competing or shifting downbeats, rapidly changing meters, and irregular rhythmic patterns.

Dorcon's dance begins much like *Sérénade*: a consistent 2/4 meter marks time, with rhythms in the timpani reinforcing the meter's downbeat and eighth-note subdivision (see Example 7.1 above). If the listener somehow fails to apprehend the dance's metric structure from the timpani's ostinato, the bass drum and divisi string bass helpfully provide additional support. The melodic rhythms deserve their phlegmatic accompaniment, adhering precisely to the eighth-note subdivision and drawing from the same limited rhythmic palette as the timpani. It is clear, after several measures of relentless metric monotony, that Dorcon's dance diverges significantly from the paths forged in *Sérénade*.

Though Dorcon's second theme (Example 7.2) slightly broadens its rhythmic variety by admitting sixteenth notes, the prosaic accompanimental regularity from the first theme persists, with the brass and percussion marking the same metric subdivision. Humorous moments provide respite from the tyranny of the metric



pulse, but only for a moment: the trombone glissandi and skittish rhythmic response (Example 7.3 above) inject a few seconds of uncertainty before the timpani and bassoons restore order. The rhythmic and metric irregularities that characterize the grotesque in Ravel's previous works are nowhere to be found in Dorcon's dance.

### **Disruption by Inversion**

Standing in isolation, the "Danse grotesque" remains a puzzling anomaly, distinct in almost every respect from Ravel's earlier "grotesque" works. When considered alongside the other character dances in *Daphnis*, however, vivid stylistic differences, particularly with regard to rhythm and meter, illuminate the blank space in the "Danse grotesque": the lack that distinguishes it from the other dances and, in turn, allows us to glimpse the grotesque elements of this number for the first time.

Unlike the implacable rhythmic tread of the "Danse grotesque," *Daphnis*'s "Danse légère et gracieuse" adopts a lilting 6/8 meter that is soon challenged by competing metric subdivisions, blending caprice with placid charm. Multiple grouping patterns in the opening measures of the dance have a destabilizing effect:<sup>378</sup> the eighth note subdivisions in the flutes conflict with dotted-quarter pulses in the horns (see Example 7.4). The reiterated pitch C in the flutes creates a ternary division of the 6/8 meter that interferes with binary (dotted-quarter) and quaternary (dotted eighth) pulses. Ravel disrupts the ternary division of the dance's second measure by

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<sup>378</sup> Bhogal, "Arabesque and Metric Dissonance," 209.

placing a C on the first *and* second beats of the melody, thus redefining the relationship between pitch and metric subdivision.<sup>379</sup>

**Example 7.4. Conflicting metric subdivisions in “Danse légère et gracieux,” R43/1-2.**

Ravel achieves temporal uncertainty in the dance not only by complicating metric relationships, but also by occasionally removing references to meter: an arpeggiated flourish, ending in a fermata, interrupts the third and fourth measures, shifting the listener’s focus from subdivision to suspension.<sup>380</sup> Other notable

<sup>379</sup> Puri discusses in detail the disruptive consequences of complex grouping dissonances in the “Danse légère,” drawing vocabulary from Harald Krebs’s *Fantasy Pieces* (a source that also motivates Bhogal’s analyses). See Puri, “Dandy, Interrupted,” 345.

<sup>380</sup> Commentators have ascribed various choreographic, dramatic, and psychological explanations to the flourish. Bhogal identifies the proliferation of short rhythmic values as “arabesques of action”—in this case, Daphnis’s expression of desire for Chloé. Puri associates the disruptive flourish with the dandy’s interest in “l’imprévu” (the unforeseen) and “l’inattendu” (the unexpected). Danielle Cohen-Levinas finds that the flourish, concluding with a fermata temporally suspended “en l’air,” transmutes space into sound which creates, as Morrison describes it, “a hearable rather than a seeable choreography.” See Bhogal, “Arabesque and Metric Dissonance,” 204, 208-13; Puri, “Dandy,

rhythmic/metric manipulations include the dance's midsection, which begins with asymmetrical, regular phrase lengths (one measure in 9/8 followed by two in 6/8) before Ravel disrupts the pattern, creating unstable phrase lengths by adding or subtracting a measure of 6/8 (see R45-47).<sup>381</sup> Lyceion's dance, which follows shortly after the "Danse légère," features similar rhythmic manipulations in 6/8 meter, including a "double hemiola" (R57).<sup>382</sup>

While Chloé's "Danse suppliante" lacks the rhythmic vitality of the "Danse légère," it displays similar instances of metric pliability with its weakened downbeats and alternating duple and triple groupings (R133).<sup>383</sup> Perhaps the most unusual feature of Chloé's dance is its temporal fluidity: pairs of measures marked *ralenti* and *au mouvement* alternate throughout, creating a regular pace from recurring gestures of rest and movement (Example 7.5). The momentum of the first measure, following a rising triplet figure, stalls with the *ralenti*, where a tied downbeat followed by a half note creates a duple grouping in 3/4 meter. For Gurminder Bhogal, the "periodicity" of Chloé's markedly irregular temporal pattern establishes a norm from which her

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Interrupted," 337; Cohen-Levinas, "Daphnis et Chloé ou la danse du simulacre," *Musical: Revue du Théâtre musical de Paris-Châtelet* 4 (1987): 93; and Morrison, "The Origins of *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912)," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 28 (Summer 2004): 74.

<sup>381</sup> Bhogal, "Arabesque and Metric Dissonance," 210.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 214-15. Bhogal adapts the term "double hemiola" from Richard Cohn; the phenomenon occurs when there are both vertical and horizontal dimensions to hemiola. In this case, the dotted eighth–eighth note pulse in the flute melody generates one level of hemiola, the dotted eighth–eighth note pulses between flute and harp another.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 221. Bhogal attributes the rhythmic reticence of Chloé's dance to her status as a captive, for unlike the other female characters—Lyceion, or the Nymphs, for example—Chloé's will is not her own.

melodic instability deviates—an interpretation that derives from the work of Justin London, who demonstrates that listeners are capable of perceiving meter in the midst of additive or irregular beat patterns.<sup>384</sup>

**Example 7.5. Duple groupings and tempo shifts in Chloé’s “Danse suppliante,” R133/1-2.**



Among the dances devoted to groups of characters, general celebration, or public tumult,<sup>385</sup> Ravel also manipulates temporal relationships through a variety of means: irregular meters, alternating meters, metric suspension, complex rhythmic groupings, conflicting metric subdivisions, and unusual tempo fluctuations, to name a few. Even the sunrise scene, with its arpeggiated rivulets of 32<sup>nd</sup> notes moving flush with the meter, includes moments of metric dissonance and hypermetric irregularity.<sup>386</sup>

The transgressive abnormality of Dorcon’s music is apparent not just in a synchronic overview of the dances, but also in the diachronous listening experience.

<sup>384</sup> Justin London, “Some Examples of Complex Meters and Their Implications for Models of Metric Perception,” *Music Perception* 13 (Fall 1995): 59-78.

<sup>385</sup> These include, for example, the “Danse religieuse,” the closing “Danse générale,” and the pantomime of Pan and Syrinx.

<sup>386</sup> Bhogal, “Arabesque and Metric Dissonance,” 234.

Metric irregularity and rhythmic elasticity suffuse the musical texture from the moment the curtain rises (R1): the flute plays varied, flexible rhythmic groupings that alternately quicken and elongate the pulse, shifting the perceived metric downbeat to beat two (Example 7.6).<sup>387</sup> After several permutations of the flute melody, a series of group dances leads up to the confrontation between Daphnis and Dorcon. Like the character dances, each group dance introduces varying degrees of rhythmic and metric conflict, which a few characteristic examples will illustrate.

**Example 7.6. Displaced downbeats in *Daphnis*, Introduction, mm. 1-6.**



The first, “Danse religieuse” (R5), maintains the same four-square meter found in the introduction (and much of traditional ballet music as well), but with subtle challenges to metric groupings and phrase structures. In the first two measures, cello and bass articulate the meter with pulses on beats one and three, while the remaining string accompaniment (violas, second violins, and first harp) introduces an agogic accent on beat two (Example 7.7). Against this rhythmic backdrop, the first violins carve a melodic arch whose rhythms are grouped in a 3 + 3 + 2 pattern—or alternatively, two measures of triple meter, followed by one measure of duple.

<sup>387</sup> Bhogal, borrowing from Krebs, identifies displacement dissonance in the passage, with the perceived downbeat shifted by one quarter note. See “Arabesque and Metric Dissonance,” 206.

Nested within this phrase structure is a secondary grouping articulated by Ravel's placement of melodic slurs, producing an asymmetrical pattern across two measures of 4/4: 1 + 2 + 1 | 2 + 1 + 1. The rest of the dance toys with subtle variations on the rhythmic and metric relationships introduced in the opening measures.

**Example 7.7. Asymmetrical rhythmic groupings in “Danse religieuse,”  
mm. R5/2-4.**

The musical score for Example 7.7 shows three staves: Vln. 1, Vln. 2, and Cb., Vc. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. Above the staves, rhythmic groupings are indicated with brackets and numbers. The first measure is grouped as 4/4. The second measure is grouped as 3/4 (1 + 2) and 3/4 (1). The third measure is grouped as 3/4 (2) and 2/4 (1 + 1). The fourth measure is grouped as 2/4 (1 + 1). The Vln. 1 staff has a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The Vln. 2 staff has a half note in the first measure. The Cb., Vc. staff has a half note in the first measure.

In the “Danses des jeunes filles”—the numbers that ignites Chloé’s jealousy—Ravel introduces an irregular meter: 7/4 with a subdivision of 3/4–2/2. The meter has little opportunity to establish itself, however, for the solo trumpet melody that announces the dance runs contrary to the 3/4–2/2 subdivision articulated by the violas. Although the trumpet’s rhythms align with the accompaniment, the melodic pitch content encourages the listener to apprehend patterns based on melodic contour and reiteration; the D-flat, in this case, serves as the starting point for each pattern,

producing a 2 + 3 + 2 grouping (Example 7.8). The pattern repeats and then gives way to a slurred, serpentine figure that concludes the phrase.

**Example 7.8. Rhythmic and metric groupings in “Danses des jeunes filles.”  
R17/1 and 4 (left), leading to R17/5 (right).**

The musical score for Example 7.8 is divided into three measures with time signatures 7/4, 3/4, and 2/2. The first measure (7/4) features a trumpet part with a 2+3+2 grouping, marked *mf*. The second measure (3/4) features an oboe/euphonium part with a 5/4 grouping. The third measure (2/2) features a viola part with a 3/4 grouping. The score includes a 'Melodic extension' arrow pointing to the right.

After introducing metric conflict, Ravel immediately reverses course in the phrase that follows (R17/4-5) by extending the trumpet motive, creating a 3 + 2 + 2 grouping which conforms to the given metric subdivision. Yet metric stability is still not achieved, for the five-beat motive crosses barlines, superimposing a 5/4 meter onto a structure already crowded with conflicting groupings. In R17/4-5, the motive repeats twice before a third repetition breaks off in mid-sentence, shaving a beat off the final grouping to create 4/4 meter.

Without any progress toward metric stability in the first five measures of the dance, Ravel returns to the serpentine figure (R17/3) that closed the first phrase and strings together five measures of consistent 3 + 4 groupings that match the meter's suggested subdivision. Just before a variation of the opening trumpet melody returns,

however, Ravel disrupts the subdivisions once more with a transitional figure that reintroduces the 2 + 3 + 2 grouping that had opened the dance (compare Example 7.8 to 7.9). One measure later (at R19), he inverts the 3 + 2 + 2 pattern heard previously in the extended trumpet motive to 2 + 2 + 3—a link made explicit by returning to the same instrument. Ravel thus concludes a cyclic progression through all the possible permutations of duple and triple groupings in 7/4.

**Example 7.9. Duple and triple groupings in transitional figure (R18/6) and trumpet variation (R19/1).**

The musical notation shows two staves. The first staff is for Flute (Fl.) and the second for Trumpet (Tp.). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 7/4. The Fl. staff has a melodic line with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth rest, then a quarter note, and a half note. The Tp. staff has a melodic line with a quarter note, an eighth rest, a quarter note, and a half note. Above the Fl. staff, there are two brackets labeled '7' indicating groupings of 2 + 3 + 2 and 2 + 2 + 3. Above the Tp. staff, there are two brackets labeled '7' indicating groupings of 2 + 3 + 2 and 2 + 2 + 3. The Fl. staff is labeled 'Fl.' and the Tp. staff is labeled 'Tp.'.

The last three beats of the trumpet melody (in R19/1) trigger a simulated echo in the first violin, viola, cello, and harp that disrupts the metric organization for several measures. As the trumpet climbs from D to E-flat and E-natural before leaping to G, the listener perceives the chromatic ascent as an anacrusis, which is confirmed by the metric and tonic accent placed on the downbeat G (Example 7.10). The motivic “echo” that follows mirrors the contours of the trumpet’s ascent—two adjacent notes followed by a small leap to G, but without chromatic fill—suggesting the continuation of the trumpet’s line rhythmic subdivisions.



**Example 7.10. Motivic “echo” in triple groupings, R19/1-2.**

The musical score for Example 7.10 is written for trumpet (Tp.) and violin/strings (Vln. I/Fl./Hp.). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 7/4. The trumpet part features a 7-beat grouping (2+2+3) and a 7-beat grouping (3+3+1). The violin/strings part features a 7-beat grouping (3+3+1). The final beat of the 7-beat grouping is marked with a question mark, indicating a rhythmic ambiguity.

Yet problems ensue, since the 3 + 3 grouping in R19/2 leaves the last pitch unaccounted for: according to the pattern, this should fall on a strong beat. If the seventh beat is included in the second grouping to create a 3 + 4 pattern, the pitch content fails to correspond to rhythmic content; the last pitch (G) should initiate a new pattern rather than conclude the previous one. Without a clear position for the final beat, the listener may organize its surrounding material in any number of ways: treating the beat as “left over,” fitting it into an incongruous grouping, or allowing lingering uncertainty about its position to affect the perceived organization of subsequent measures.

In the “Danse générale” (R26), the last group dance before Dorcon’s “Danse grotesque,” Ravel layers previously juxtaposed themes and motives that retain their distinct rhythmic and metric profiles. Both the staccato trumpet figure and the slurred, serpentine response from the “Danses des jeunes filles” make an appearance, inverted from their previous order and superimposed over a third theme that had been introduced at R21 (the “Danse des jeunes gens”). The 7/4 meter common to all three

seems more a source of mutual disagreement than an organizing principle, for each theme is rhythmically independent from the others.

In Ravel's variation of the serpentine motive (R26/1) a 3 + 4 division of the meter predominates, just as it did in the motive's original presentation. The phrase continues with the staccato trumpet motive (R26/2), also grouped as it first appeared: 2 + 3 + 2, which conflicts with both the subdivided time signature (3/4–2/2) and the previous measure's rhythmic grouping (Example 7.11). At the same time, the first violins, accompanied by the violas, perform a melody whose subdivision of its the fourteen beats contains its own inversion: 4 + 3 in the first measure (conflicting with the time signature and the piccolo melody), followed by 3 + 4 in the second (congruent with the metric subdivision, but still conflicting with the piccolo melody). The bass, with its 3 + 4 division in both measures, switches allegiances, agreeing with the piccolos in the first measure before aligning with the first violins.

**Example 7.11. Layered metric subdivisions in the “Danse générale,” R26/1-2.**

The musical score for Example 7.11 illustrates layered metric subdivisions in the "Danse générale" from Ravel's Suite for Piano, measures R26/1-2. The score is in 3/4-2/2 time and consists of two measures. The Piccolo (Pic.) part has a 14-beat phrase divided into 3+4 in the first measure and 2+3+2 in the second. The Violin I (Vln. I) and Viola (Va.) parts have a 7-beat phrase divided into 4+3 in the first measure and 3+4 in the second. The Bassoon (Cb.) part has a 7-beat phrase divided into 3+4 in both measures. Dynamics range from piano (p) to mezzo-forte (mf).

### *Irregular Regularity: Rhythmic and Metric Norms*

Rhythmic and metric manipulations in the dances of the first tableau resemble the techniques Ravel employs throughout the ballet.<sup>388</sup> Common to most of these dances are shifting binary and ternary divisions of meter, flexible rhythmic groupings that often conflict with dominant metric subdivisions, and diverse accenting patterns—including tonic, metric, agogic, and stress accents—that articulate multiple metric schemes.

Critics noticed the work's unusual rhythmic *souplesse* and generally praised Ravel's invention and unpredictability. Louis Laloy found a 1912 concert performance of the work "lively in rhythm and ingeniously varied," while Robert Brussel, reviewing the ballet's première, similarly applauded its unexpected rhythms (*l'imprévu du rythme*).<sup>389</sup> For Émile Vuillermoz, whose most vociferous complaints were directed towards the quality of the stage curtain and the machinery used to deploy it, the "systematically plastic" score attained an artistic standard unmatched by its *mise en scène*.<sup>390</sup> Adolphe Jullien expressed a similar sentiment, appreciating the ballet's unexpected unity: "The pages that could yet be criticized for their fluidity,

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<sup>388</sup> Bhogal considers metric instability in several dances not discussed here, including the Nymphs's "Danse lente et mystérieuse" and the pantomime of Pan and Syrinx. See Bhogal, "Arabesque and Metric Dissonance," 217-221, 225-229.

<sup>389</sup> Louis Laloy, "Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Ricardo Viñes," *Grande revue* 66 (25 April 1911): 846; Brussel, "Les Théâtres."

<sup>390</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, "Les Théâtres [review of *Daphnis et Chloé*]," *S.I.M. Revue musicale* 8 (15 June 1912): 67.

their inconsistency, are framed by more important and solidly constructed ones which, on the contrary, give cohesion to the entire work,...”<sup>391</sup>

Those who found fault often singled out the work’s rhythmic complexity and elasticity for special criticism. Gaston Carraud, a frequent critic of Ravel, found a few things to admire about *Daphnis*, but rhythm was not one of them: “In Ravel’s poetic and picturesque score, [rhythm] is of an extreme weakness.”<sup>392</sup> Because the music unfolds through repetition, Carraud claimed, Ravel’s enervated rhythms have choreographic consequences, giving “the impression of stomping rather than genuine movement.”<sup>393</sup> Pierre Lalo added, without irony, that the work “misses the most primary quality of ballet music: rhythm”<sup>394</sup> (at least, the sort of rhythm conventionally associated with ballet). Even Laloy, who had praised the work in its concert performance, conceded incongruities between the characters, the choreography, and the rhythmic intricacy of the music: “Butterflies or seagulls would dance on these tiny rhythms more willingly than those shepherds in loose tunics.”<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Adolphe Jullien, “Revue musicale [review of *Daphnis et Chloé*],” *Journal des débats* (23 June 1912): 2. “C’est que les pages auxquelles on pourrait encore reprocher leur fluidité, leur inconsistance, sont encadrées dans d’autres, plus importantes et solidement construites, au contraire, qui donnent à l’oeuvre entière une cohésion,…”

<sup>392</sup> Gaston Carraud, “Théâtres [review of *Daphnis et Chloé*],” *La Liberté* (11 June 1912): 3. “Il est, dans la poétique et pittoresque partition de M. Ravel, d’une faiblesse extrême, et—le développement s’y faisant toujours par répétitions, donne l’impression du piétinement plutôt que du véritable mouvement.”

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Pierre Lalo, “La Musique [review of *Daphnis et Chloé*],” *Le Temps* (11 June 1912). “Mais il lui manque ce qui est la première qualité d’une musique de ballet: le rythme.”

<sup>395</sup> Laloy, “La Musique,” 848. “Plus volontiers, sur ces rythmes menus, danseraient les papillons ou les cigales que ces bergers en tuniques flottantes.”

The views of these critics may be understood by applying to the music both London's study of complex metric perception and Bhogal's formulation of metric instability in Chloé's dance. If periodicity aids the listener in regularizing unstable rhythmic and metric patterns in a single dance, then the pervasive reiteration of such patterns may produce a similar effect throughout the work. Ravel's listener, who encounters rhythmic and metric irregularity within the first few measures, experiences these phenomena as norms that subsequently generate new expectations. When Carraud observes that *Daphnis* proceeds through repetition,<sup>396</sup> he approaches Ravel's own formulation of the work's structure, which achieves homogeneity through "a very strict tonal scheme by means of a few motifs."<sup>397</sup> Like the ballet's melodic architecture, its inventive, complex temporal relationships acquire congruence through reiteration.

Since listeners bring cumulative prior experience with Western music to each new hearing, *Daphnis* poses a special problem: multiple, juxtaposed expectations that simultaneously vie for attention and prominence. When Ravel introduces metric conflict into one dance, or repeatedly fluctuating tempi in another, the listener—already aware that temporal games are the norm in this work—adjusts expectations accordingly. At the same time, experience with Western music teaches that certain patterns are to be preferred and expected over others, and these very patterns are the

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<sup>396</sup> Jean Chantavoine also notes that Ravel's music, "too dry" for real development, "proceeded by repetitions and twisted elaborations" (*par répétitions et par amplifications tortillées*). See Chantavoine, "Chronique musicale [review of *Daphnis et Chloé*]," *La Revue hebdomadaire* 21 (13 July 1912): 266.

<sup>397</sup> "Autobiographical Sketch," in *Ravel Reader*, 31.

ones that Ravel conscientiously undermines throughout the work. As a result, Ravel creates a doubly contradictory norm: the listener recognizes irregularity as a rule but never fully adapts to its particulars.

As demonstrated earlier, irregular rhythmic and metric relationships help evoke the grotesque, but irregularity need not necessarily be part of the equation. In *Sérénade* and *L'Heure*, Ravel accomplishes this feat by importing unconventional rhythmic and metric relationships into conventional musical space: time is marked by meter, but the meter is irregular, unstable, or persistently undermined. By the time Ravel had written *Daphnis*, he had already produced works that employed similar temporal manipulations: apart from *Sérénade* and *L'Heure*, there were also *Miroirs* (1905) and *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), with other candidates likely to emerge through future study.<sup>398</sup> The expressive purposes of these temporal manipulations may vary from work to work: *Gaspard's* “Ondine,” for example, features relationships between metric dissonance, femininity, and exoticism. Notwithstanding differences in aesthetic import, Ravel’s unusual treatment of rhythm and meter became a trademark of sorts—something that critics, and undoubtedly audiences, were starting to notice.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Bhogal’s dissertation, which devotes chapters to “Noctuelles” from *Miroirs* and “Ondine” from *Gaspard de la nuit*, reveals rhythmic and metric play similar to that found in *Sérénade* and *L'Heure*. See “Arabesque and Metric Dissonance,” 1-28 and 115-187.

<sup>399</sup> A term commonly encountered in Ravel criticism is *originalité*—which, as Carlo Caballero demonstrates in his perceptive study of French musical aesthetics, is sheathed in ambiguity. For the French composer in Fauré’s time, the source of originality was the singular personality or spirit for which musical innovation served as a surface manifestation. See Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*, Music in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 76-77.

Ravel’s originality may well have encompassed rhythmic, harmonic, and structural invention. Chantavoine was one critic who picked up specifically on Ravel’s rhythmic novelty and variety,

In *Daphnis*, pervasive temporal fluxions suggest an amplification of techniques that Ravel had previously explored, and subsequently annexed, into his compositional territory. Ravel's rhythmic novelty, apparent in his early works, gives way to an entire ballet whose musical language is defined, in large part, by its irregular rhythmic and metric relationships. Though the style of any ballet is profoundly linked to its musical rhythm, *Daphnis* twists this relationship irrevocably, making irregularity the invariant face of a protean choreographic body.<sup>400</sup>

The rhythmic invention that characterizes the work's opening seeps into the group dances that follow, while the persistence of irregular rhythms establishes a norm to which most of these dances adhere. Within these confines, the "Danse grotesque" is remarkable precisely because it is, rhythmically and metrically speaking, unremarkable: its rhythms are crassly, conventionally square—almost a parody of excessively danceable ballet music. Just as Ravel's prior grotesque works rely on the transgression of boundaries to evoke their effect, the "Danse grotesque"

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complaining about the "unexpected rhythms" (*rythmes imprévu*) in *L'Heure*, while praising the "richness" (*richesse*) of rhythms in "Ondine." Fokine similarly recalled the "unusual and at the same time natural rhythms" of *Daphnis*. See Chantavoine, "Chronique musicale [*L'Heure*], 580; "Chronique musicale [*Gaspard*]," *La Revue hebdomadaire* (13 March 1909): 261; Fokine, *Memoirs*, 200.

<sup>400</sup> Fokine notes that the choreographic style of the work varied widely and included scenes staged hurriedly, only days before the première—a felicitous hardship, as it turned out, for he declared the choreography of the ending to be "original, totally different from any other of the many finales I had produced before." The panic scene, which featured Chloé's rescue from the pirates, was a quasi-collaborative effort, with Fokine involving the dancers in creating their own "sculptural" forms in groupings; the frenzied activity of the final dance was captured by sending the Bacchantes across the stage as individuals and groups, with each dancer learning her part only. See Fokine, *Memoirs*, 210-11, 213-14.

operates under the same principle: Ravel merely inverts the technique of its deployment.

### **Dancing Dualism**

Hugo's preface to *Cromwell* (1829) characterized the grotesque in opposition to the sublime, made apparent through dualities in nature (ugly/beautiful) and humanity (body/soul). Thirty years later, however, Hugo viewed the grotesque as subsumed dualities rather than binary opposites. This view finds expression in "Le Satyre," the poem from *La Légende des siècles* (1859) in which the grotesque Pan discovers his rightful place among the gods by transforming into a world. Pan's physical distortions form the topography of the new landscape, demonstrating Hugo's view of the grotesque in nature while at the same time surpassing his binary oppositions by "presenting the grotesque as the source of a new sublime vision."<sup>401</sup> Dorcon's transgression of social norms finds an aesthetic correlative in the "Danse grotesque," which musically and choreographically portrays his desire for Chloé as an irregular phenomenon that flourishes outside the accepted social order. At the same time, his dance also provides a necessary counterpart to the "Danse légère"—a key for interpreting both the character of Daphnis and the aesthetic values that his music communicates.

Daphnis's strategy for coaxing affection from Chloé is unusual, for he casts himself in place of Chloé as the object to be desired—an inversion of conventional

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<sup>401</sup> Merhi, "Distortion as Identity," 50.



masculine and feminine roles that Puri identifies as effeminate or androgynous.<sup>402</sup> Yet Dorcon also takes part in the contest in order to put himself on display, to be watched and judged by the crowd, whose spectatorship invests the contest with social and aesthetic values grounded in cultural expectations.<sup>403</sup> When the crowd jeers Dorcon's dance and identifies Daphnis as the winner, it delivers a judgment that reinforces social order. Daphnis is supposed to end up with Chloé, not just because his dance is better, but because his social status requires it: in the novel, both he and Chloé are nobles raised among shepherds. An alliance between them transcends romance, meeting the expectations of this fictional Greek society. The social values encoded in the narrative complement musical norms in *Daphnis*, contrasting the beauty and "conventional" irregularity of Daphnis's dance with the transgressive regularity of Dorcon's.

Puri's provocative analysis of the paired dances validates their narrative and aesthetic import by focusing on the *volte-face*, a musical fulcrum that unites two divergent behaviors of Daphnis: his "geste brusque" (with which he shoves Dorcon aside) and his tender approach to Chloé (accompanied by the waltz theme).<sup>404</sup> The "geste brusque" reveals Daphnis's newly awakened desire, while the waltz theme (a composing-out of the "geste brusque's four-note fragment) portrays its sublimation.

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<sup>402</sup> Puri, "Dandy, Interrupted," 332.

<sup>403</sup> Here I draw on Judith Mayne's study of spectatorship in film, which introduces "institutional" spectating through two films, *Coma* and *Rear Window*: "Hence, the pleasures and dangers affiliated with watching and listening,...are channeled into powerful cultural and narrative myths of man and woman, social class, private and public life." See Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Sightlines (London: Routledge, 1993), 31.

<sup>404</sup> Puri, "Dandy, Interrupted," 321-26, 329.

For Puri, the *volte-face* thus reflects in miniature the process of sublimation performed through the dance contest: Dorcon's sexual appetite, conveyed in the "Danse grotesque," is followed by Daphnis's "Danse légère et gracieuse," which diverts desire to performance art.

In the pair of dances, Ravel characterizes the adversarial relationship between Dorcon and Daphnis through virtually every means available to him: contrasting orchestration, rhythm and meter, melodic contour and character, phrase structure, and treatment of dissonance. Puri contends that the sublimation enacted by the dance contest "engages other binarisms of character, shifting from the awkward to the graceful, the ugly to the beautiful, and the primitive to the civilized."<sup>405</sup> Yet even as Dorcon and Daphnis seem ideally poised to play antagonists, their participation in the contest reveals affinities that belie their musical and choreographic opposition.

In his novel, Longus invests Daphnis with multiple dualities that emerge in his upbringing and, more particularly, his sexual experiences. After establishing oppositional relationships between gods, mortals, and animals, he introduces similarities between each group that undermine their differences. Longus repeatedly identifies Daphnis with the goat, noting that Daphnis suckled a goat as an infant and sometimes behaved like a member of the animal kingdom, once leaping into the fray of a goat fight and emerging "king."<sup>406</sup> Daphnis's tussle with the goats prefigures his contest with Dorcon, in which the "rivals are conceived, at least in part, as male

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>406</sup> Stephen Epstein, "The Education of Daphnis: Goats, Gods, and the Birds and the Bees," *Phoenix* 56 (Spring/Summer 2002): 25-26.

animals in rut, as becomes clearer from the way they identify themselves with their herds in their boasts.”<sup>407</sup> Yet while Daphnis acknowledges the animal within, he reaches for the divine through allusion and metaphor, comparing himself with Apollo, Dionysius, and Zeus; the latter, he notes, was also suckled by a goat.<sup>408</sup> Perhaps the most telling analogy occurs when Daphnis describes his similarity to Pan, a hybrid figure whose parentage and physical characteristics combine the human, animal, and divine.

The ballet, which skips much of the novel’s exposition, condenses Daphnis’s bestial impulses into a single incident: the “*geste brusque*” with which he shoves Dorcon aside, where violence is wedded to desire. In the novel, Longus intertwines the same themes when Dorcon tries to attack Chloé while disguised in a wolfskin, which both anticipates (through pantomime) and retrospectively reflects (through myth) Pan’s attempted rape of Syrinx.

Daphnis shares more with Dorcon than his music seems willing to admit. In the ballet narrative, both characters believe themselves to be worthy suitors for Chloé, accept the terms of the contest, and make their bodies available to the onlookers for comment. Both commit alternately violent and tender acts that communicate their desire. Dorcon violates the social order by transgressing musical norms in his dance;

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 32.

Daphnis also stirs up the crowd's discontent with his "geste brusque," which signals a need to clarify the social hierarchy and leads to the contest.<sup>409</sup>

Prior to the contest, Daphnis adopts behavior more characteristic of his rival, shoving Dorcon before turning affectionately towards Chloé. As a cowherd to Daphnis's goatherd, Dorcon already inhabits a more prestigious position in the hierarchy of pastoral occupations,<sup>410</sup> and besides, Daphnis is guilty of the first strike. The rivals' positions reverse when they dance: while Dorcon's "Danse grotesque"<sup>411</sup> reveals his departure from various norms, Daphnis's "Danse légère" demonstrates his conformity to them—musically, choreographically, and socially. In conforming, Daphnis takes desire, the raw material that he and Dorcon share, and transforms it into art through physical display.

As opposition to the "Danse grotesque," the "Danse légère" evokes Hugo's notion of sublimity and its associations with beauty, light, the intellect, and the soul. At the same time, both dances typify his revised dichotomy, which renders the sublime and grotesque not only interdependent, but related through origin and

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<sup>409</sup> These affinities in characterization are evident in the novel as well. When Longus shows the characters participating in a verbal contest, he reveals similarities in their thinking patterns by grouping their boasts and insults around the same topics: beauty vs. ugliness, parentage, wealth vs. poverty, and occupation. (The novel's verbal confrontation between Daphnis and Dorcon is replaced in the ballet with the dance contest, which conveys through music and choreography many of the same points raised by the characters in their oratories.) Just before Dorcon's death in the novel, he hands his pipes to Chloé—a gesture that parallels the Theocritean account of Daphnis offering his pipes to Pan before his own death. R.L. Hunter, *A Study of Daphnis and Chloé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 82, 92.

<sup>410</sup> Hunter, *Study of Daphnis and Chloé*, 23.

<sup>411</sup> Although the ballet excludes Dorcon's attack on Chloé, the "Danse grotesque" partially fulfills the purpose of this incident in the novel by disclosing the character's unwillingness to submit to expectations, whether musical or social.

transformation. In transcending the unrestrained expression of desire that Dorcon illustrated with musical transgression, Daphnis enacts a transformation that progresses from grotesque to sublime.

### **Sublime Artifice: Transforming the Grotesque**

Though Hugo's views continued to hold sway in the *fin/début de siècle*, the sublime took on new associations that resonated with contemporary developments in the visual arts, literature, and psychiatry. Catalogues by the *Trésor de la langue française* reveal that the word "sublime" gradually declined in use from 1800 to 1955;<sup>412</sup> dictionary entries that bookend Ravel's lifespan similarly reflect a shift in the term's use. Both Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1872-77) and the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1932-35) relate the sublime to high moral or intellectual character, as well as elevation and grandiosity in style.<sup>413</sup> Only the earlier Littré links the term explicitly with the fine arts, defining it as a species of the beautiful pursued "to a superlative degree through a serious subject."<sup>414</sup> Decadent literature of the *fin-de-siècle*, including the works of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Huysmans, and Gourmont, portrays the sublime as "interior to the literary act," erased

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<sup>412</sup> Marie-Claire Bancquart, "Une Mise en cause du sublime à la fin du xixe siècle: Sublime, sublimé, sublimation," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 86/1 (1986): 109. The *Trésor*, which tracks linguistic trends in a variety of texts from the humanities to the sciences, found 620 instances of "sublime" in 1800, compared with 195 in 1955, with intervening decades showing a steady decline.

<sup>413</sup> See Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1872-77), s.v. "sublime," and *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, s.v. "sublime."

<sup>414</sup> *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. "sublime." "Terme de beaux-arts. Le beau à un degré très éminent en un sujet grave."

from public life by urban cacophony and decay.<sup>415</sup> While in some ways its inaccessibility to the masses endowed the sublime with a privileged appeal, its association with genius and interiority also rendered it a form of metropolitan neurosis.

In the mid-nineteenth century, brothers and literary aesthetes Edmond and Jules de Goncourt turned their living quarters into a retreat for pleasure and languor, fashioned in rococo-inspired designs and various *objets d'art*.<sup>416</sup> Subscribing to contemporary psychological theories concerned with sensory overstimulation prominent in urban life, the brothers withdrew from public to private space, although living and working in their apartments provided little relief: contemporary psychologists argued that those who exerted “continuous mental effort, unrelieved by physical action, could yield a state of physical exhaustion and mental hypersensitivity, called neurasthenia.”<sup>417</sup> Adjunct to the Goncourts’ concern with urban environments was their belief that neurasthenia was the natural condition of the artist—the sickness necessary to stimulate the mind. The highly ornamented, rococo interiors of the brothers’ quarters became less an oasis than a source of nervous energy; for Edmond, “the wall patterns, engraving lines, and furniture forms in his

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<sup>415</sup> Bancquart, “Une Mise en cause du sublime,” 110-11.

<sup>416</sup> Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 25-34.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

boudoir stimulated him to a ‘feverish,’ palpitating, and heightened state necessarily preceding his writing.”<sup>418</sup>

Artists who subscribed to theories of neurasthenia believed that its sources—decay and degeneration in urban society—caused the public loss of the sublime, which could be achieved only through private, artistic creativity. Yet those who might still gain access continually found themselves drawn from their reveries to sensual distractions, the “commandments of the flesh.”<sup>419</sup> In retreating to the decorative interior, artists sought both the elevation of sublimity through art and the nervous stimulation necessary to achieve it.

As a counterpart to the “Danse grotesque,” the “Danse légère” introduces tensions between the “old” Hugolian sublime and the “new,” which is grounded in neurosis. In the contest, the spectating crowd reacts to the “Danse légère” with aesthetic appreciation: after driving Dorcon away with jeers and laughter, they turn to the “radiant group” formed by Daphnis and Chloé embracing at R53.<sup>420</sup> The music at this point accompanies not only the embrace, but also the reverential gaze of the spectators—an ethereal sound achieved with the high register of Daphnis and Chloé’s theme, marked *très expressif* in the first violins, and the accompaniment of the

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 38. The *style moderne* adopted by the Goncourts, and later manifested in Art Nouveau designs, preferred the intimate, feminine, and organic: small furnishings, curvilinear shapes, pieces designed for display rather than function, all situated in a modern space that subdivided large rooms into small apartments. Bhogal connects ornamented, feminine Art Nouveau styles with musical arabesque—a particularly useful application for Ravel’s “Ondine,” in which she identifies themes of fantasy, eroticism, exoticism in the saturated musical surface. See Bhogal, “Arabesque and Metric Dissonance,” 71-75, 116-120.

<sup>419</sup> Bancquart, “Une Mise en cause du sublime,” 112. Bancquart borrows the phrase from Gourmont.

<sup>420</sup> “Les rires s’interrompent devant le groupe radieux que forment Daphnis et Chloé enlacés.” R52/9–R53/3.

textless choir singing with “bouches fermées,” as if their sound is traversing a great distance. At the same time, Ravel imbues the music with materiality: the entire string section (excluding the bass) joins the first violins in playing the couple’s theme, like the body attending the celestial soul.

In the “Danse légère,” Daphnis reveals his situational duality: in that moment, he is both artist and artwork, creator of his performance and object of the spectators’ vision. As a work of art, he fulfills Hugo’s expectations for the sublime, uniting grace and beauty in the service of a noble principle—romantic love, its physicality expressed through movement. That Daphnis’s dance takes place in a public, pastoral sphere, where the crowd may take part, judge, and experience its sublimity, distances the “Danse légère” from the decadent sublime, which derives from interactions between artist, urban environment, and interior space.

If Daphnis sublimates desire through dance, he simultaneously adopts the self-conscious artist’s reflexively critical position. Choosing to disguise rather than express his dominant emotion, Daphnis exploits and consequently transforms his desire, creating a work whose beauty and refinement belie its turbulent origins. The placid opening of his dance gives way, however, to a framed interior section featuring a quicker tempo (*plus animé*) and kinetic tremolos in the strings and winds. Bhogal interprets Daphnis’s digressive flourishes, frequently changing meters, and conflicting rhythmic groupings as musical arabesque evincing his desire; Puri finds that the “B” section of the dance releases the emotions that Daphnis sublimates in the outer sections, bracketing the “marginal” material that threatens the stability of the



frame. Neurasthenia provides a passage from one theory to the other, testing the tensions that enfold Daphnis's "sublime" performance as artist/artwork with his "sublimated" desire.

For the spectating crowd, the "Danse légère" (Daphnis as artwork) embodies those qualities associated with the elevated beauty and splendor of the Hugolian sublime. Yet the music that Daphnis "hears" and performs through gesture is replete with the discursive ornaments and irregularities of arabesque described by Bhogal as reflections of his desire. Arabesque projects the sensory stimulation necessary to sublimate the material desires of the flesh in order to produce art. Daphnis thus participates in a self-sustaining circularity that transforms both music and desire: the musical arabesque that stimulates his creative impulse also overwhelms him, as his yielding to physical desire is portrayed by the same arabesque that initiates the figurative cycle.

In enacting the agon of the sublime, the "Danse légère" reflects the larger aesthetic dichotomy of sublime and grotesque, dramatically figured by Daphnis and Dorcon. Puri introduces the notion of self-portraiture in the dance contest: by featuring "good" and "bad" music that is alternately cheered and jeered by the crowd, the scenario may encode Ravel's own aesthetic values, while also allowing him to take a jab at the group of staid composers affiliated with Vincent d'Indy's Société Nationale.<sup>421</sup> If the "Danse grotesque" and "Danse légère" inhabit an aesthetic

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<sup>421</sup> Puri views the dance contest as "an aesthetic and tendentious reenactment of Parisian musical politics circa 1910, pitting the bungling exoticism of Vincent d'Indy's Société Nationale versus the iridescent art of Ravel and his newly formed Société Musicale Indépendante." See Puri, "Dandy, Interrupted," 330.

spectrum rather than oppositional positions, however, the dance contest may provide an additional witness to a familiar charge: Ravel's preference for artifice over sincerity.

For Ravel, the relationship between art, expression, and emotion is intertwined with his purported rejection of sincerity—namely, that the artist should prize illusion, insincerity, and artifice above all else. An artist's creative ability lies not in the autobiographical translation of emotion into artwork, but in the capacity to edit, disguise, and transform. Baffled by Ravel's attempts to parse the finer distinctions in his aesthetic formulation, some contemporary critics accused him of dissembling; his music, guilty by association, was believed to dismiss expressive candor in favor of irony, acrobatics, and affected refinement.<sup>422</sup>

Despite complaints about the unnecessary complexity of Ravel's music, many critics sought simplistic explanations for it. In relying on oppositional aesthetic relationships—sincerity versus artifice, for example—they allowed little opportunity to explore the thickets that divided one position from the other. Yet in the thickets is precisely where Ravel wanted to be, enlivened by the chance to manipulate the aesthetic tensions that undergird binary relationships. His statement addressing the interaction of art, artist, and emotion is typical: "Moreover, since we cannot express ourselves without exploiting and thus transforming our emotions, isn't it better at

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<sup>422</sup> Carlo Caballero devotes a chapter of his book on Fauré to sincerity, framing it as both an aesthetic phenomenon and "a spiritual practice, complementary to the material practice of craft." In his view, Ravel equated sincerity with the activity of the unconscious mind, whose creative impulses are littered with intellectual incoherence. Ravel's "reductive" view of sincerity thus leads him to embrace artifice—the craft of composition—as an avenue of escape, liberating him from sincerity's constraints. See *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*, 11-56, especially 32-35.

least to be fully aware and acknowledge that art is the supreme imposture?”<sup>423</sup> Embedded within this endorsement of artistic “insincerity” is the recognition that emotions play an important role in the creative process: expression arises from heightened emotional awareness, which the artist cultivates and manipulates.

In Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, painter Basil Hallward remarks, “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.”<sup>424</sup> Wilde’s fictional aesthete aptly characterizes the self-reflexive tendencies of certain artworks—like the dance contest—that in turn evoke an autobiographical gloss. Dorcon, a parody who engages multiple levels of musical and dramatic discourse, experiences the same functional duality as Daphnis: he is both artist and artwork, dancing to gain the approval of the crowd and the admiration of Chloé. If Dorcon’s dance represents unsublimated desire, then his music reveals the artistic consequences of raw emotion gone awry: “bad” music, the product of a “sincere” artist whose creative process precludes compositional agency and emotional transformation. The conventional comic tactics in the “Danse grotesque” ridicule both the character of Dorcon and the artist whose work originates from a surfeit of sincerity. Puri interprets the nervous energy in this passage as Daphnis’s inability to control his emotions—the unleashing of desire that exposes and critiques the artist’s

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<sup>423</sup> Ravel, “Memories of a Lazy Child,” in *Ravel Reader*, 395. The ease with which Ravel delineates a knotty aesthetic principle in a single sentence can be both deceptive and disarming; as a result, interpretations of his remarks tend to neglect subtle variations in meaning.

<sup>424</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings*, ed. Richard Ellman (New York: Bantam, 1982), 8. Caballero also turns to this text to explore the ways in which writers and composers approach the concept of sincerity (and insincerity) differently. See *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*, 23.

sublimated state.<sup>425</sup> If Daphnis functions as Ravel's artistic counterpart, however, then he also represents the impossibility of expressing "genuine" desire, for the very act of its expression through a creative medium decisively alters its makeup.

Dorcon, the "sincere" artist limited by the exigencies of emotional reflex, invites sincerity from his auditors, who have no reason to doubt the emotional truth of the artist's performance. Yet in jeering Dorcon, the crowd has made clear its preference: they choose Daphnis, the artist liberated through artifice, concealing the vulgarity of pure sentiment by adopting a critical distance from his emotions. Typically the artist who admits to exploiting emotion in creative endeavors begs skepticism on the part of listeners and critics, but Ravel's "Danse légère" provokes the opposite response from the crowd: they admire Daphnis. The emotion that seems liberated in the "B" section of Daphnis's dance may indeed be artistic dissembling, no different than the transfiguration of desire that creates the dance's placid exterior frame; to the crowd this scarcely matters. Enfolded in the dance contest is an opportunity for Ravel to redress the critical reception of his music, with the artificer emerging triumphant—not by restraining or indulging emotion, but by transforming it.

Dorcon, the unsuccessful entrant in the contest's competing creative processes, channels desire directly into art, breaking Ravel's own aesthetic "rules" and revealing the hazards of artistic sincerity. Just as the grotesque often evokes the transgression of natural law, so too does the "Danse grotesque" enact the

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<sup>425</sup> Puri, "Dandy, Interrupted," 343-44.

consequences of Ravel temporarily subverting his own compositional principles. Though Ravel had valorized the grotesque in previous works, like *L'Heure espagnole*, he inverts this perspective in Dorcon's dance by presenting the grotesque as a consequence of creative fecklessness.

### **Archaism and Temporal Displacement**

As recent commentators have noted, multiple temporal strata characterize both the compositional history and the reception of *Daphnis*. For Deborah Mawer, a sense of past in this work is relative: ancient Greek myths, first recorded around 500-400 B.C.E., informed Longus's fictional novel written circa 200 C.E., followed in the sixteenth century by Amyot's French translation, which was Ravel's primary source.<sup>426</sup> Puri finds a similar "stratification of time" in the ballet's narrative anachrony, as characters from Daphnis and Chloé's mythic past materialize in their present; the Nymphs, who awaken from a fossilized effigy one-third of the way through the ballet, in turn invoke another archaic being, the god Pan.<sup>427</sup> The physical arrangement of characters and figures onstage, with the worshipers closest to the audience, the Nymphs in an intermediate position, and Pan in the background, reflects "the order of their animation as well as their position in history."<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Mawer, *Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, 93.

<sup>427</sup> Puri, "Theorizing Memory," 95.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

Additional folds in the temporal fabric may be found in the ballet's choreography, for which Fokine envisioned distinct styles of movement based on ancient Greek art from two epochs. Poses and gestures from Classical Greek painting and sculpture inspired the movements of the shepherds, shepherdesses, warriors, Bacchantes, and Daphnis and Chloé themselves. For Dorcon and the Nymphs, Fokine adopted "archaic poses" that recalled an earlier period of antiquity, when Greek artists had assimilated styles and techniques popularized by the Egyptians. Dorcon's choreography consisted largely of "angular positions," captured in Plate 7.1 by Valentine Hugo's extemporaneous sketches.<sup>429</sup> The Nymphs more readily evoked bas-reliefs and Egyptian silhouettes, their movements described by Fokine as "almost stylized and exclusively in profile."<sup>430</sup>

In presenting the Nymphs as organic relics, Fokine reinforces their narratological function: to conjure the past by appealing to Pan for help. His motive for choreographically linking Dorcon with the Nymphs, however, is less clear. Fokine claims that Dorcon's angular movements are intended to convey his clumsiness, contrasting with the graceful positions of Daphnis—an aim captured in Hugo's sketch. Yet if this is the case, why would he take the additional step of assigning Dorcon, a contemporary of Daphnis and Chloé, "archaic" poses when his movements sufficiently represent the brutishness of his character? The problem of

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<sup>429</sup> The pitchfork drawn atop Dorcon's raised arm probably represents his flattened hand. See Valentine Hugo, *Nijinsky on Stage: Action Drawings by Valentine Gross of Nijinsky and the Diaghilev Ballet Made in Paris Between 1909 and 1913*, ed. Richard Buckle (London: Studio Vista, 1971), 131.

<sup>430</sup> Fokine, *Memoirs*, 213.

Dorcon's incongruous temporality in the "Danse grotesque" raises another question: Who is meant to view Dorcon as grotesque?



**Plate 7.1. Pencil sketch of Dorcon by Valentine Hugo. Image as reproduced in Hugo, *Nijinsky on Stage*, 130.**

Daphnis and Chloé's Mediterranean island of Lesbos is far from a pastoral paradise. The protagonists, who are not indigenous to country life, encounter physical and sexual violence several times in the course of their romance;<sup>431</sup> Daphnis even has a mildly violent outburst of his own. Since the grotesque both breeds and

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<sup>431</sup> Bruce MacQueen, *Myth, Rhetoric, and Fiction: A Reading of Longus's Daphnis and Chloé* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 161-62.

feeds on conflict, the ballet's pastoral setting is ripe with disruptive elements through which the grotesque might emerge diegetically.

In a hermeneutic context, Dorcon's dance is the "work" to which the spectating crowd responds and subsequently attempts to define. Fokine, following Longus's narrative, choreographically portrays their reaction when Dorcon completes his dance: an ironic imitation of his "gauche" gestures that ends with a cascade of laughter.<sup>432</sup> Ravel records both responses in the music with the parodic repetition of Dorcon's previous phrase, followed by the hiccupping grace notes whose literalism makes an easy target for the ungenerous critic (see Example 7.3 above).

If Dorcon's dance appears grotesque to the crowd, their reaction does not reflect it. The grotesque may evoke a range of responses, from Baudelairean comical excess to tentative or indecisive gestures,<sup>433</sup> but the crowd's laughter (which seems neither pained nor excessive) suggests that they find Dorcon awkward, silly, and clumsy—but not grotesque. For the contemporary audience, however, Dorcon's dance summons polyvalent associations that extend beyond those apprehended by the onstage crowd. Perhaps the audience recognizes Dorcon's clumsy, angular postures as choreographic cousins of the Nymphs, roused from an archaic past to inhabit the "present" of the ballet. Though Dorcon is not similarly resurrected from a mythic

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<sup>432</sup> "La foule imite ironiquement les gestes gauches du bouvier...qui termine sa danse au milieu d'un rire général." R40/1–R41/2.

<sup>433</sup> Of the discourses on the grotesque treated here, only Baudelaire's presents the sweeping criterion that laughter alone can signify the grotesque. Baudelaire then spends most of his essay clarifying and qualifying this statement, noting that the grotesque inspires "true and violent laughter" provoked by an "insane and excessive mirth."



past, his archaic choreography indicates that his “pastness” is twice displaced from the audience’s present.

The Janissary instrumentation that characterizes Dorcon’s dance may elicit a complementary response from the audience, which associates this musical style with an exotic, extramusical Other: in this case, a cultural rather than aesthetic difference. By situating the “Danse grotesque” in a temporal space distinct from the other human characters, its archaism becomes the source of yet another parody that targets performance conventions in French opera and ballet. Ravel’s monotonous four-square rhythms in Dorcon’s dance exaggerate ballet composers’ preference for consistent, danceable meters: a *démodé* orthodoxy that contrasts with the supple, surprising, and irregular rhythmic combinations in the “Danse légère.” In the dance contest, ballet’s music-historical past meets its future, with Ravel proffering his own music (in Daphnis’s dance) as a challenge to convention.

When Ravel translates the mocking crowd’s mimicry and laughter into music, he satirizes the parodies in Dorcon’s dance, creating a reflexive musical commentary on (and perhaps critique of) his own process of caricature. His mimetic accompaniment functions simply and effortlessly as broad humor, but at the same time it brings to mind the criticism sometimes leveled at Ravel, both in his day and our own. With regard to the crowd’s parody of Dorcon, Ravel’s treatment is almost too simplistic, calling to mind similar moments in *L’Heure espagnole* when music and text coordinate with perfect literalism. In his opera, Ravel established overtly harmonious unions in order to subvert them; in *Daphnis*, however, the purpose behind

such literalisms may relate to the self-referential styles that distinguish Dorcon from Daphnis. If Dorcon's music reflects the work of a composer expressing pure sentiment—the work of a “bad” Ravel—might its parody by the crowd also exhibit characteristics of a “bad” parody? Just as Ravel evokes the grotesque through a new rhythmic context by inverting the relationship between regular and irregular meters, he may similarly divert comic techniques from past works to new ends: in this case, a parody commenting on musical parody.

The “Danse grotesque” transgresses the plastic irregularity that characterizes the ballet while multiplying parodies with non-diegetic referents—all activities that exercise the music's grotesque effect on its audience. In addition to these techniques, the archaism of Dorcon recalls the grotesque arising from an interpretive act of temporal displacement. For the crowd of onlookers, who do not interpret Dorcon's dance as grotesque, the archaism of his movements are symptoms of a generic awkwardness. For the audience, however, Dorcon's archaism unhinges the ballet from the eternal present that tends to envelop pastoral tales, foregrounding the temporal distance that separates them from the characters—particularly Dorcon, the Nymphs, and Pan. Pierre Nora's comment about the “chasm” separating past and present deserves repeating here: “For a sense of the past there had to be a ‘before’ and an ‘after,’ a chasm had to intervene between the present and the past.”<sup>434</sup> In bridging the chasm, the audience experiences the grotesque.

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<sup>434</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 16.

## Pan, Syrinx, and Mythic Metamorphosis

The pantomime of Pan and Syrinx has as little in common with the “Danse grotesque” as the refined and virtuosic “Danse légère” did. Unlike Dorcon’s dance, the pantomime respects the temporal norms of the ballet with its fluctuating tempi, sudden flourishes, irregular rhythmic groupings, and metric instability. Yet even though the pantomime is “exterior to the narrative,” its capacity for reflexive meaning<sup>435</sup> renders it indispensable to a study of the grotesque: through the pantomime, the grotesque extends beyond the dance contest to express the aesthetic preoccupations of the ballet itself.

In the myth of Pan and Syrinx, recorded in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and recounted by Longus, Syrinx flees from Pan’s advances and, fearing for her safety, retreats to a marsh where she transforms into reeds. Unable to find Syrinx, Pan binds several of the reeds together to form a pipe of unequal lengths, “just as their love had been unequal.”<sup>436</sup> Although a number of etiological myths feature the fusion or transformation of disparate forms, the myths of Pan and Syrinx shares common narrative trajectories, characterizations, and functions with the myth of Apollo and Daphne (also recounted in *Metamorphoses*). Like Pan, Apollo pursues Daphne to the

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<sup>435</sup> Both Puri and Morrison have considered this same quality in the pantomime. Puri offers several compatible interpretations, in which Daphnis and Chloé recount their courtship, stage an act of memory, and enact the “hierarchical relationship between music and dance that is traditional for ballet.” In addition, Puri suggests that the pantomime models the causal relationship between desire and sublimation—a theme he feels motivates the ballet itself. Morrison notes that the pantomime, like the ballet itself, is a play of Symbolist correspondences that “swaps metaphors for the metaphorical.” See Puri, “Theorizing Memory,” 29, 100; Puri, “Dandy, Interrupted,” 363; Morrison, “Origins of *Daphnis et Chloé*,” 59.

<sup>436</sup> Longus, *Daphnis and Chloé*, trans. J.R. Morgan (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 2004), 79.

point of physical exhaustion, requiring her to find an immediate means of escape: transforming into a laurel bush.

Mary Barnard, who considers the grotesque in various accounts of Apollo and Daphne, notes that the myth evokes “hybridization...incongruity, and the clashing of incompatibles.”<sup>437</sup> In questioning its mythopoeic aspects, Ovid’s retelling facilitates a grotesque interpretation of the myth. When he compares Apollo to a hound chasing a hare, for example, he injects comedy into an outwardly violent scene. Daphne’s metamorphosis into the laurel presents its own form of hybridization, which Ovid heightens beyond literary metaphor by animating each stage of the transformation with vivid, descriptive language.<sup>438</sup>

Barnard suggests that in a past antecedent to both Ovid’s time and our own, Daphne’s metamorphosis is a normal event—the sort that makes etiological myths possible. For the modern reader, such mythical law no longer applies: transformation is a “vision of dehumanization” making “what was once perfectly natural in that world of mythical forms...unfamiliar and alien.”<sup>439</sup> Just as Baudelaire found once-

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<sup>437</sup> Mary Barnard, *The Myth of Apollo and Daphne from Ovid to Quevedo: Love, Agon, and the Grotesque*, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, no. 8 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 16.

<sup>438</sup> “Scarce had she thus prayed when a down-dragging numbness seized her limbs, and her soft sides were begirt with thin bark. Her hair was changed to leaves, her arms to branches. Her feet, but now so swift, grew fast in sluggish roots, and her head was now but a tree’s top. Her gleaming beauty alone remained.” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vol. 1, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 41.

<sup>439</sup> Barnard, *Myth of Apollo and Daphne*, 37. In fact, Barnard suggests that Ovid’s grotesque effect gains even greater power when explored by Quevedo, a seventeenth-century writer even further removed from antiquity: “In Ovid, a cosmology of migrating forms provides a background that mitigates the ominous grotesquerie of dehumanization; the reader knows that the metamorphosis is the means by which the nymph acquires a new ‘body’ and so preserves her identity as a virgin. In

powerful symbols from antiquity to be grotesque for the modern interpreter, so too does the myth of Apollo and Daphne enact a transgression of norms for today's readers.

In the myth of Pan and Syrinx, the topoi of flight and metamorphosis invite comparison with Barnard's grotesque interpretation of Apollo and Daphne. Like Ovid's Apollo (whose hybrid form emerges through metaphor), Pan is a fusion of incongruent characteristics: physically, he has the torso of a man and the hindquarters and horns of a goat; metaphysically he is, by some accounts, part animal and part deity, the son of Zeus and a she-goat.<sup>440</sup> In Longus's novel, Syrinx rejects Pan precisely because of his hybridity, claiming that she "would never accept a lover who was neither completely a goat nor completely a man."<sup>441</sup> Pan's hybrid form extends beyond his body to encompass the ritualistic practices of his worshipers, who established the cult of Pan in grottoes.<sup>442</sup> As a goatherd, Pan became associated with

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Quevedo, as in Garcilaso [de la Vega], the absence of the ancient cosmology intensifies the grotesque effect." See *Myth of Apollo and Daphne*, 136.

<sup>440</sup> Philippe Borgeaud, *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*, trans. Kathleen Atlass and James Redfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 42-43. Hugo's poem "Le Satyre," which fuses grotesque and sublime through the liminal figure of Pan, contends for Pan's mortality even as he casts off his "pieds de faune" to assume his place among the gods.

<sup>441</sup> Longus, *Daphnis and Chloé*, 77 (2.34). Note that Syrinx suggests she is open to a liaison with either a man or a goat, stipulating only that the lover must be entirely one or the other—another example of a "mythical law" that accepts as normal a phenomenon considered transgressive in modern cultural practice.

<sup>442</sup> Pan was one of many pastoral figures for whom grottoes served as devotional sites; others included Hermes, the Nymphs, and Dionysus. Though the Greeks considered the Nymphs "principal occupants" of the grottoes, Pan soon became such an important figure that his identity was as closely linked with caves as the Nymphs'. See Borgeaud, *The Cult of Pan*, 48.

the caves that sheltered his flocks, as well as the goat itself, which “dwell[s] between plain and mountain, forest and field, and is neither wild nor truly domestic.”<sup>443</sup>

While Pan’s hybridity is a stable manifestation of his dual nature, Syrinx’s transformation links her blended physical form to temporal processes. A popular subject for painters over the centuries, Syrinx evoked incongruity and caprice for artists who lingered over the incremental stages of her transformation. Peter Paul Rubens’s *Pan and Syrinx* (1636) portrayed a voluptuous Syrinx wading into a marsh, torso twisting from Pan’s grasp; the fingers and thumb on her left hand sprout plant tendrils (Plate 7.2).<sup>444</sup> Once Syrinx assumes her vegetable form, Pan creates and plays the pipe—an instrument that, for Longus, is both a memento of Syrinx and a metaphorical allusion to her, fashioned from the reeds into which she disappeared.

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<sup>443</sup> Epstein, “Education of Daphnis,” 27.

<sup>444</sup> Works roughly contemporary with Rubens’s that similarly depict Syrinx include a Dutch mannerist drawing (ca. 1590) by Karel van Mander and an engraving (1602-4) by Crispijn de Passe; the latter ingeniously stations Syrinx amidst stalks of reeds, a few of which extend above her thighs like pubic hair. Both images, along with the Rubens painting, may be seen in *Pan & Syrinx: eine erotische Jagd*, ed. Justus Lange, Christine van Mulders, Bernhard Schnackenburg, and Joost vander Auwera (Kassel: Staatliche Mussen Kassel, 2004), 120, 123, 172.



**Plate 7.2. Peter Paul Rubens, *Pan and Syrinx* (1636). Oil on canvas, Musée Bonnat, Bayonne.**

### **The Paradox of Acting**

The pantomime, which achieves the obligatory *pas de deux* for Daphnis and Chloé, removes many of the visual cues that evoke the grotesque, concealing Pan and Syrinx's hybridity. As the graceful Daphnis stands in for Pan, he erases the jarring, visceral impact of the god's physical form; even if his choreography had mimicked the distinctive gait of Pan's hooves, the effect would still be diminished.<sup>445</sup> Chloé's

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<sup>445</sup> In the novel, Longus indicates that Daphnis "ran on tiptoe to mimic hooves," but in ballet, this would hardly work: moving *en pointe* evokes classical beauty and linearity rather than the goat-like gait of a faun. See Longus, *Daphnis and Chloé*, 79: 2.36 (2).

transformation takes place off-stage, eliminating the process of her metamorphosis and with it, her temporary hybridity. The potential for comic incongruity fades without the lurching haunches and hooves of Pan, as does the incipient threat of violence: Daphnis cannot truly frighten Chloé the way Pan did Syrinx because of his deep affection for her.

Ravel's music nevertheless intertwines narrative threads of desire, creation, caprice, and violence, generating musical-dramatic disjunctions whose entanglement is associated with the disorienting *vertige* of the grotesque. The pantomime opens with Chloé playing the role of Syrinx, roaming through the meadow to the accompaniment of the oboe and English horn (R172). The music, with archaic parallel fifths and hushed strings hovering like a sonic scrim, sounds too stark and emotionally remote to characterize Chloé, who has just reunited with her beloved after narrowly escaping an assault. In projecting Syrinx's tranquility and archaism, the music foregrounds the mythic past over the dramatic present, portraying Chloé's "character" rather than Chloé herself. As she relinquishes her musical identity, Chloé embodies the transformative process of performing; at the same time, she reveals the emotional disjunctions that arise between performer and performance.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> To evoke an analogy contemporary with Ravel's eighteenth-century vision of Greece, Chloé approaches the art of Denis Diderot's actor, who possesses within herself "an unmoved and disinterested onlooker." See Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. William Archer (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957), 14.



**Example 7.12. Chloé “performs” Syrinx in the pantomime, R172/1-4.**



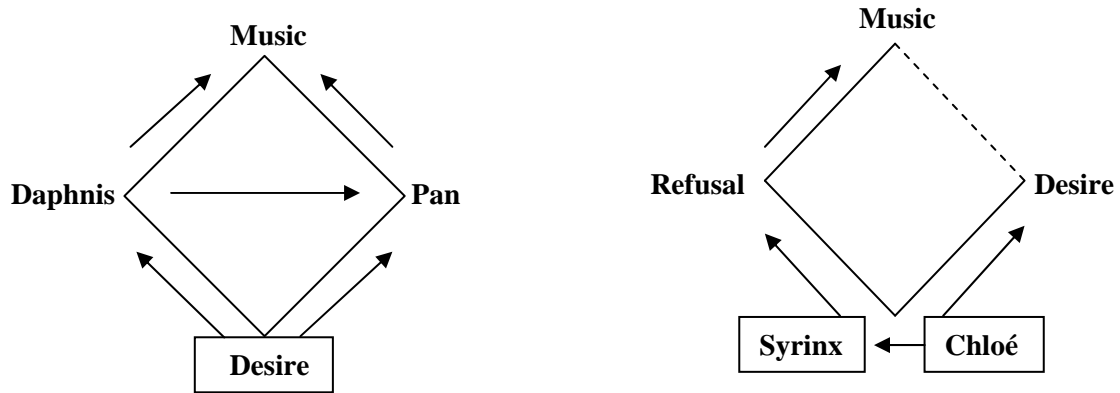
For Daphnis, acting proves a comfortable fit, at first: he encounters few distinctions between his emotions and those of his character. As “Pan” professes his love for Syrinx, Daphnis gives voice to his own feelings for Chloé (R172/5-7). When Chloé pushes him away (R174), the sinking *expressif* oboe melody captures the emotions of Syrinx, who seeks to evade Pan’s overtures<sup>447</sup>—not Chloé, who wants to languish in her beloved’s embrace. Daphnis, remaining in character, responds to Chloé’s refusal by growing more insistent; his ascending flourish—previously associated with both display and desire in the “Danse légère”—portrays the “fused intentions” of Daphnis and Pan.<sup>448</sup>

These first two narrative exchanges establish patterns of interaction that encompass four characters, four sets of emotions, two sets of actions (Daphnis-Pan and Chloé-Syrinx), and one musical score to portray them. For Daphnis, whose intentions align with Pan’s, the music expresses a symmetrical, congruent relationship

<sup>447</sup> Bhogal, “Arabesque and Metric Dissonance,” 226.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

between actor, character, and music; for Chloé, this relationship is asymmetrical and dissonant, with character and music aligned against the actor (Figure 7.1).<sup>449</sup>



**Figure 7.1. Relationships between music, character, and narrative for Daphnis (left) and Chloé (right).**

In the next phrase, Ravel complicates Daphnis and Chloé's respective interactions with the music by inverting previously established patterns and introducing dualities of musical and dramatic meaning. After Daphnis-Pan's second entreaty, Chloé initially responds in precisely the same manner as before—rejection expressed by the “sinking” motive, transferred from the oboe to solo clarinet (R174/4). Yet in the measure that immediately follows, Chloé's music takes an unexpected turn: an ascending flourish in the oboes suddenly emerges from the

<sup>449</sup> Even though Daphnis does not experience the psychological strife that characterizes Chloé's performance, he is not entirely immune from disjunction. The contrast between his dramatic stability and her psychological discord opens a fissure between the two, allowing Daphnis the dramatic agency and musical expression of desire that is denied Chloé.

clarinet's descending motive, which trails off in the middle of the measure. Though the flourish seems both abrupt and impetuous, it is appropriate in the narrative context: Syrinx takes flight into the reeds. What is surprising, however, is that the music belongs to Lyceion, Daphnis's disrobing temptress from the first tableau. The reference to Lyceion may function as a manifestation of desire, establishing a link between the amorous intents of both women<sup>450</sup> and providing a musical rite of passage as Chloé graduates from ingénue to inamorata.

At the same time, the motive has other implications for Chloé's performance of Syrinx and the relationship between her character(s) and the music. The musical flourish represents a pivotal moment for Chloé, allowing her to express her intentions simultaneously with Syrinx's theme of flight. Chloé may even step out of character with Lyceion's motive, which conveys precisely the amorous impulse Syrinx is trying to avoid; in asserting her desires, Chloé redirects musical expression to her own ends.

For Daphnis, the aims of his character, Pan, finally diverge from his own, producing the disjunction between music and character that had previously belonged to Chloé. After Chloé-Syrinx withdraws into the reeds, Daphnis's music adopts an anguished variation of the motive that had first introduced the nymph, exchanging parallel thirds and fifths for seventh chords (Example 7.13; compare with Ex. 7.12). The variation, which replaces Syrinx's woodwinds for strings and introduces the first *forte* in the pantomime, portrays Pan's sense of loss—and perhaps a small dose of guilt as well. While Pan indulges in romantic privation, forming a flute from the

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<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

reeds to play “un air mélancolique,” Daphnis seeks to revel in Chloé’s return, his delight heightened by disaster averted. The motivic evocation of Syrinx suggests a musical alignment with Pan, indicating that Daphnis, like Chloé in the pantomime’s opening, is ceding his personal interests to those of his character, evoking the paradox of acting.

**Example 7.13. Syrinx’s motive, transformed to express Pan’s despair (R175/2-3).**



When Pan took up the pipes to play, he inspired a critical debate among musical and literary scholars over his motives. Pan’s performance may simply externalize his memory of Syrinx, with the recognition that “to breathe life into a pipe is to breathe life into one’s desires, in this case to create the soul of Syrinx.”<sup>451</sup> In this interpretation, Pan realizes his desire by possessing Syrinx spiritually, at the same time acknowledging that as long as he cannot possess her physically, his relationship will remain incomplete. Motivated by desire, Pan creates music which, in turn, fails to satisfy his desire, thus giving rise to a new impulse to create: his condition mirrors

<sup>451</sup> Dorothy Zayatz Baker, *Mythic Masks in Self-Reflexive Poetry: A Study of Pan and Orpheus* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 62. The part of Baker’s study relevant to my own focuses on the French Symbolist poets, in particular Jules Laforgue’s “Pan et la Syrinx,” from *Moralités légendaires*.

that of the artist, perpetually suspended between reciprocal, but irreconcilable, interests.<sup>452</sup>

Puri applies a similar argument to this moment in the ballet: as Pan sublimates his desire in music, Syrinx emerges as music's embodiment. The pantomime's reflexive capability manifests the themes of desire and sublimation that underscore the whole ballet: sublimation "brings music into the world as a means of expression and consolation; dance arises in response to music, thereby restoring embodiment to music's sublimated desire."<sup>453</sup> When the ballet narrative indicates that "Chloé" reappears and "figures the accents of the flute through her dance,"<sup>454</sup> Puri suggests that it is Syrinx who returns, acting as a physical metaphor for music itself.

Yet Pan and Syrinx both continue to exist as roles enacted by other characters, whose performance constitutes a gloss on everything the audience hears and sees. At the same time that Pan laments love lost, Daphnis rejoices in love regained; while Syrinx's physical echo suggests the need for memory, Chloé's presence contradicts this need: she is wholly restored. Conflicting motivations for Daphnis, Chloé, and the characters they perform obfuscate attempts to assign values of musical expression to one character or another, for the exigencies of performance leave all four characters inextricably entwined.

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>453</sup> Puri, "Theorizing Memory," 44-48, and "Dandy, Interrupted," 363.

<sup>454</sup> "Chloé réapparaît et figure, par sa danse, les accents de la Flûte." R176/3-6. Pan's performance occurs in both the myth and the ballet, while Chloé's dance appears in the ballet only.

The musical-choreographic duet between Pan and Syrinx reveals the asymmetry and incompleteness that characterizes their relationship: Syrinx appears as the product of Pan's memory, animated by the rhythm of his music, which strips her of both materiality and intention. Daphnis and Chloé, by contrast, present a state of fulfillment, their relationship fueled by mutual attraction and the prospect of physical union.<sup>455</sup> The music, stretched taut by competing narrative and dramatic tensions, must satisfy the conflicting demands placed upon it.

Pan's melody, for example, unfolds through a series of improvisatory gestures, including scales, turns, and chromatic fill between gapped intervals. Its irregular, fluctuating rhythmic groupings—associated Pan's desire or yearning—combine with unadorned, longer note values that suggests his grief: unpredictable, digressive music thus aligns with emotional instability.<sup>456</sup> Daphnis's emotions are at odds with his performance of grief; Pan's digressive melody evokes a mournful introspection that masks Daphnis's exuberance over love regained. Chloé's relief over her return, physically unadulterated, must be similarly restrained as she performs Syrinx, who sacrificed human form for safety. Like the activity of narration, which bridges the narrative past and the reader's present, Daphnis and Chloé's psychological disjunctions comment upon the relationship between performer and performance.

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<sup>455</sup> The symmetry of Daphnis and Chloé's relationship, compared with the asymmetry attributed to Pan and Syrinx, is manifested in their recurrent motive, which inverts symmetrically around a central axis: the motive's descending fifth and step-wise decoration is complemented by an ascending fifth with similar decoration.

<sup>456</sup> Bhogal, "Arabesque and Metric Dissonance," 226-27.

Ravel sustains flexible, irregular rhythmic groupings throughout the pantomime, introducing frequent variations in tempo when Pan begins to play (around R178). By R186, the music grows increasingly animated as Chloé whirls about frantically, finally collapsing in Daphnis's arms to the accompaniment of a rapid descending scale, propelled from the piccolo down to the alto flute. As Daphnis and Chloé break free from their roles, fragments of their love theme appear, interrupted by exuberant, ascending flourishes. The music, which celebrates the romantic union of the couple, also reflects the return of their musical agency, marking the end of their performance and the re-emergence of their identities to the crowds onstage and off.

### **The Figurative Grotesque**

With the verbal equivalent of a pencil sketch, Ravel provides a succinct, revealing commentary on the relationship between imagination, historicism, and the creative process of *Daphnis*:

My intention in writing it was to compose a vast musical fresco, less concerned with archaism than with faithfulness to the Greece of my dreams, which is similar to that imagined and depicted by French artists at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Ravel, "Autobiographical Sketch," in *Ravel Reader*, 31. "Mon intention en l'écrivant était de composer une vaste fresque musicale, moins soucieuse d'archaïsme que de fidélité à la Grèce de mes rêves, qui s'apparente assez volontiers à celle qu'ont imaginée et dépeinte les artistes français de la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle." See "Esquisse Autobiographique," in *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 45-46.

Fokine, who had hoped to introduce ancient Greek music to modern French audiences, adjusted his expectations when he learned that too little was known of Greek musical practice.<sup>458</sup> Ravel seemed happy to pursue the project from the vantage point of deliberate temporal displacement.

In the pantomime, the characters of Pan and Syrinx are accessed only through multiple layers of enactment, diminishing both the turbulent nature of their encounter and the visual impact of their physical hybridity. Peeling back Ravel's decision to evoke eighteenth-century visual art in *Daphnis* reveals other models that he may have considered and rejected—among them, the work of Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), whose 151 black-and-white lithographs decorated Paul-Louis Courier's eighteenth-century translation of *Daphnis*.<sup>459</sup> In Plate 7.3, Bonnard's Pan (in the upper left corner) chases Syrinx, shown in mid-stride with something resembling a tunic trailing behind her—which, unlike drapery flapping in a runner's wake, seems to slough off like a second skin.<sup>460</sup> If the status of Syrinx's metamorphosis is unclear in the lithograph, Bonnard still captures the movement, caprice, and potential violence integral to the narrative.

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<sup>458</sup> Fokine, *Memoirs*, 196.

<sup>459</sup> This edition was based on the sixteenth-century Amyot translation that Ravel enjoyed reading. See Mawer, *Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, 84-85. Ravel knew Bonnard (who had also illustrated Jules Renard's *Histoires naturelles*) and admired his work.

<sup>460</sup> Edmund Dulac, the French illustrator whose lavish, delicate images animated fairy tales, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and an edition of Poe's poetry, produced an image of Syrinx as a fugitive hybrid. One of his cover illustrations for *American Weekly* (15 February 1931) shows Syrinx dipping in a river, green leaves and stems shooting up over her nude body like open-weave mohair. Ravel may never have encountered Dulac's illustrations, which appeared in English-language publications with the likes of Arthur Rackham's.





**Plate 7.3. Pierre Bonnard, *Pan and Syrinx* (1902). Image as reproduced in Bouvet, *Bonnard: The Complete Graphic Works*, 157.**

Instead, it is François Boucher whose 1759 painting of Pan and Syrinx thematically resembles the pantomime's approach to musical characterization and *mise en scène*—an artist Ravel had also evoked in his ballet argument for *Ma Mère l'oye* (1911), drafted during the same period in which he composed *Daphnis* (approximately 1909-1912).<sup>461</sup> Boucher's depiction of Pan and Syrinx parallels those of other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French artists, who used the theme of

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<sup>461</sup> The Boucher reference occurs in Scene 5, *Laidronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*: "A tent draped in Chinese style. Male and female pagoda attendants enter. Dance. Laidronnette appears in the Chinese style of Boucher. A green serpent crawls amorously at her side." See *Ravel Reader*, 510.

flight to create unusual figural compositions or to display pastoral (female) flesh in a luminous setting. His pleasure-seeking nymphs, frankly displayed beneath an artificial light source in the painting's foreground, are the primary focal point (Plate 7.4). Pan occupies the middleground, his hybridity scarcely visible. Boucher tilts his spotlight slightly upward to illuminate Pan's muscular shoulder and back, partially concealing his hairy haunches in the reeds and shadows. By temporally situating the painting in the moment following the metamorphosis, he avoids Syrinx's hybridity altogether.



**Plate 7.4. François Boucher, *Pan et Syrinx* (1759). Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.**

Through the telescopic lens of French rococo painting, Ravel magnifies an idealized sensuality that thrives on the play of form, light, color, and shadow, musically enabled by his sensitivity to timbre and inventive orchestral combinations. The conceit of the pantomime neutralizes Pan and Syrinx's hybridity, replacing transgressive physical forms with human figures whose performance provides the point of access to the mythic past. Like Boucher's nymphs, who upstage Pan's botanical ransacking, both the scenario and Ravel's music avoid the topos of violence in favor of other themes—desire, flight, yearning, and grief.<sup>462</sup> Yet just as Boucher obliquely evokes Pan's frenzy, Ravel effaces, but does not erase, violence: a theme from the pirate attack recurs in Pan's melody, linking Chloé's abduction with Syrinx's near-escape and reminding the listener that both were targets of violent intent.<sup>463</sup>

In choosing to view Greece through the fanciful vision of eighteenth-century painters, Ravel foregrounds the aesthetic process that both characterizes and conceals the pantomime's grotesque, enacted amidst layers of physical, temporal, and musical disjunction. While Ravel is twice displaced from the narrative past of *Daphnis*, Pan and Syrinx are similarly displaced from the contemporary viewer, occupying a mythic past in which Pan's hybridity, like Syrinx's metamorphosis, fulfills its etiological function without transgressing natural law. Temporal distance and changing cultural

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<sup>462</sup> Fokine, who sought more overt expressions of violence and eroticism, found in Ravel's music a "lack of virility" which blunts its efficacy in portraying the antique world. Though Fokine's criticism applied to unspecified sections of the work, it could easily describe the pantomime, in which Pan's hot-blooded lust is tempered by languorous tempos and sparse orchestral textures.

<sup>463</sup> Puri, "Theorizing Memory," 39-40.

expectations enable the contemporary viewer to apprehend Pan and Syrinx as grotesque, despite the fact that the music adheres to norms established throughout the ballet.

Like the dance contest, the pantomime's performance within a performance invites the audience to carve away the flesh of art, revealing its bones and sinews—the creative processes that both animate and echo the self-reflexive work. As an interpretive process, the grotesque engages the complete creative spectrum: complementary acts of creation, reception, and interpretation articulated by composers, performers, and listeners. The grotesque's mode of presentation, obliquely manifested through the self-conscious performances of Daphnis and Chloé, inscribes onto the scene a commentary on the creative process.

When Ravel tints his view of antiquity with the palette of rococo art, he makes temporal displacement—the artist's natural state in relation to past sources and influences—a conscious and deliberate choice, mirroring the process by which Pan and Syrinx seem grotesque to the modern viewer. Daphnis and Chloé's musical and choreographic homage transforms the past—and themselves—through disjunctions that expose both the artifice of performance and the performance of myth. Just as Ravel acknowledges that emotion cannot be translated into music untransformed, so too does he position the past at a critical distance; by creating musical-dramatic incongruities in Daphnis and Chloé's performance, he acknowledges that the artistic mediation of past and present irrevocably alters both.

The reflexive implications of Ravel's compositional decisions in the pantomime present a means of relating the grotesque to his compositional approach more generally. Ravel's fascination with technical feats of daring places continual pressure on existing musical boundaries reinforced through conventional means, only to be challenged and manipulated through the course of a work. Though he freely combines Andalusian dance rhythms, Mozartean melodies, blue notes, and baroque toccata figures in a single work,<sup>464</sup> Ravel's disjunct pastiche remains a model of formal clarity: his friend and student, Manuel Rosenthal, remarked that "'form' was the magic word in Ravel's teaching."<sup>465</sup>

In claiming that "there is nothing that music can not undertake to do, or dare, or portray, provided it continues to charm and always remains music," Ravel self-consciously aligns himself with Mozart; at the same time, he acknowledges, even indulges, his self-conscious temporal displacement by provocatively juxtaposing incongruous musical styles. The paradoxes that characterize the grotesque fit seamlessly with Ravel's precarious aesthetic position: like Daphnis and Chloé, he is poised at the temporal crossroads, witnessing many pasts, constructed and transformed through the work of art.

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<sup>464</sup> This description could characterize a few of Ravel's compositions, but the one I have in mind is the Piano Concerto in G Major: part Gershwin, part Erik Satie, and part Looney Tunes soundtrack.

<sup>465</sup> "Ce mot 'forme' était le mot magique dans l'enseignement de Ravel." Manuel Rosenthal, *Souvenirs*, 110.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *LA VALSE* AND THE PURLOINED PLOT

Famous for its magnetically destructive climax, *La Valse* left wreckage of a different sort before its orchestral premiere. Ravel had conceived of the ballet as early as 1906, envisioning a celebration of the Straussian waltz entitled *Wien*;<sup>466</sup> Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes had staged *Daphnis et Chloé*, became involved with the project in its latter stages, perhaps around the time Ravel was completing the solo piano version. In 1920, the duo-piano version was launched at a private performance attended by Igor Stravinsky and Francis Poulenc, among others. According to Poulenc, Diaghilev called the work a “masterpiece,” but claimed that “it’s not a ballet...It’s the portrait of a ballet...It’s the painting of a ballet.”<sup>467</sup> The encounter, from which Ravel departed silently with manuscript in hand, marked the end of his professional collaboration with Diaghilev.

*La Valse* finally had its choreographic début in October 1926 by the Royal Flemish Opera Ballet in Antwerp, followed three years later by a production at the Opéra staged by Ida Rubinstein and Bronislava Nijinska. Writing for *Le Temps*,

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<sup>466</sup> Though an ardent admirer of Richard Strauss, Ravel is careful to specify that his music-historical inspiration for the project is “the other one, Johann.” Ravel to Jean Marnold, Draveil, 7 February 1906, in *Ravel Reader*, 83.

<sup>467</sup> Francis Poulenc, *Moi et mes amis*, ed. Stéphane Audel (Paris: Palatine, 1963), 179.

Henry Malherbe summed up the production's defects: "We are, on the bank of the Danube, in a marble swimming pool surrounded by high, massive columns....Mme. Ida Rubinstein, in a silver corset and a cap with flaxen plumes, pretends a sort of aquatic goddess of the waltz."<sup>468</sup> Long before choreographic interpretations had taken hold, however, audiences had already rendered a verdict on *La Valse*.

### **Waltzing Past the Graveyard**

For many contemporary listeners, the twelve-minute performance of *La Valse* enacted the nostalgia, disruption, and loss of the post-World War I experience. The orchestral version of the work, premiered in December 1920 as part of the Concerts-Lamoureux, inspired critics to offer both lavish praise and various ancillary interpretations of its "program." Among these, Theodore Lindenlaub's stands out both for its evocative language and its grafting of musical historicism, memory, and contemporary social and political realities onto a work whose title invokes none of these things. Writing for *Le Temps*, Lindenlaub described Ravel's imaginative trip to the Viennese past, where blithe, spirited waltzes collide with anguished modern counterparts:

There he found, among the ruins, among the void and misery of the present, the relentless waltzes of the past....The artist's sharp perception...[chronicles]...the contrast of these insouciant, jaunty waltzes of long ago with those unfortunate, distressed ones which turn by habit, or else to deaden their sadness and hunger with defunct jovialities. And this rising, lugubrious frenzy, the battle between all this

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<sup>468</sup> Henry Malherbe, "Chronique musicale," *Le Temps* (29 May 1929). "Nous sommes, au bord du Danube, dans une piscine de marbre entourée de hautes colonnes massives....Mme Ida Rubinstein, en corset d'argent et en toque aux aigrettes blondes, figure une sorte de divinité aquatique de la Valse." Malherbe concludes his review with a sentence praising Ravel's music.

Johann Strauss which doesn't want to die and that course toward ruin, takes on the aspect of a dance macabre.<sup>469</sup>

Antoine Banès sounded a distinctly unconventional opinion, characterizing the work as a “parodic apotheosis” that glitters with comic treatments of Straussian rhythms.<sup>470</sup>

Jean Poueigh employed similar language, though without ironic undertones, portraying the work as “a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz” and avoiding a programmatic bent by paraphrasing what Massenet might have said: “It constitutes a sensitive, admiring homage directed towards the genre itself, personified by the late Johann Strauss, one of its kings.”<sup>471</sup>

Reviews like Lindenlaub's must have been prevalent enough by 1922 that Ravel felt prompted to set the record straight. When an interviewer with *De Telegraaf* asked whether the composer had based *La Valse* on his impressions of Vienna during his last trip there, Ravel responded that he had not. Anticipating an inevitable follow-up question about the work's meaning, he volunteered this interpretation:

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<sup>469</sup> T. Lindenlaub, “À Travers les concerts,” *Le Temps* (28 December 1920). “Il y a retrouvé, au milieu des ruines, du vide du temps présent, de la misère, les valse obstinées d'autrefois....La fine perception de l'artiste...[enregistre]...le contraste de ces valse allègre, insouciantes de naguère avec ces malheureux en détresse, qui tournent par habitude ou pour étourdir leur tristesse et leur faim sur ces joyeusetés défunte. Et cette frénésie montante et lugubre, la lutte entre tout ce Johann Strauss qui ne veut pas mourir et cette course à la ruine, prend une allure de danse macabre.”

<sup>470</sup> Antoine Banès, “Les Concerts...Concerts Lamoureux,” *Le Figaro* (13 December 1920): 3.

<sup>471</sup> Jean Poueigh, “Les Grand Concerts,” *Comoedia* (13 December 1920): 2. “La nouvelle oeuvre de M. Maurice Ravel,...est une sorte d'apothéose de la valse viennoise. De cette *Valse*, Massenet eût dit qu'elle constitue un sensible hommage d'admiration envers le genre lui-même, personnifié par feu Johann Strauss, l'un de ses rois.” In his “Autobiographical Sketch,” dictated in 1928, Ravel uses almost exactly the same language as Poueigh when he describes *La Valse* as “une espèce d'apothéose de la valse viennoise.” See *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 46.



[*La Valse*] doesn't have anything to do with the present situation in Vienna, and it also doesn't have any symbolic meaning in that regard. In the course of *La Valse*, I did not envision a dance of death or a struggle between life and death. (The year of the choreographic argument, 1855, repudiates such an assumption.) I changed the original title "Wien" to *La Valse*, which is more in keeping with the aesthetic nature of the composition. It is a dancing, whirling, almost hallucinatory ecstasy, an increasingly passionate and exhausting whirlwind of dancers, who are overcome and exhilarated by nothing but "the waltz."<sup>472</sup>

Two weeks later, perhaps with the *Telegraaf* interview fresh in his mind, Ravel responded to a query from Maurice Emmanuel, a composer and historian who wrote program notes for the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire.<sup>473</sup> Emmanuel, aware of the conflicting interpretations of *La Valse* circulating among critics, asked Ravel to illuminate his compositional intentions. He replied by asserting ownership of the work's interpretation, affirming its independence from political and historical circumstance and alluding to many of the reviews already cited:

I believe that this work needs to be illuminated by footlights, as it has elicited so much strange commentary. While some discover an attempt at parody, indeed caricature, others categorically see a tragic allusion in it—the end of the Second Empire, the situation in Vienna after the war, etc.—

This dance may seem tragic, like any other emotion—voluptuousness, joy—pushed to the extreme. But one should only see in it what the music expresses: an ascending progression of sonority, to which the stage comes along to add light and movement.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> C.v.W., "The French Music Festival," *De Telegraaf* (30 September 1922), in *Ravel Reader*, 423. "Elle n'a rien à voir avec la situation présente à Vienne, non plus qu'aucune signification symbolique à cet égard. En composant *La Valse* je ne songeais pas à une danse de mort ni à une lutte entre la vie et la mort. (L'argument du ballet se situe en 1855, ce qui interdit pareille supposition.) J'ai changé le titre, *Wien*, en *La Valse*, qui correspond mieux à la nature esthétique de la composition. C'est une extase dansante, tournoyante, presque hallucinante, un tourbillon de plus en plus passionné et épuisant de danseuses, qui se laissent déborder et emporter uniquement par la valse." See *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 345.

<sup>473</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 230n1.

<sup>474</sup> Ravel to Maurice Emmanuel, Montfort l'Amaury, 14 October 1922, in *Ravel Reader*, 230. "Il faut croire que cette oeuvre a besoin d'être éclairée par les feux de la rampe, tant elle a provoqué de commentaires étranges. Tandis que les uns y découvraient un dessein parodique, voire caricatural,

When asked his opinion of *La Valse* in a 1924 interview with *ABC de Madrid*, Ravel similarly addressed the extra-musical programs that had attached themselves to the work, refuting the suggestion that either postwar Vienna or the Second Empire's decline figured into its composition.<sup>475</sup>

The competing, oppositional elements that audiences first perceived—light and darkness, life and death, war and peace, nostalgic past and world-weary present—continue to influence modern scholarship, which often focuses on the work's quasi-programmatic duality. Sevin Yaraman suggests that the apparent struggle in *La Valse* may be traced to an artistic anxiety of influence, with Ravel paying homage to Strauss while simultaneously attempting to free himself from the grip of his model.<sup>476</sup> Deborah Mawer's musical and choreographic study finds dualities on multiple structural levels, from surface-level rhythms and harmonies to large-scale antagonisms that evoke pre- and post-War aesthetics.<sup>477</sup> Both Mawer and George Benjamin associate the diatonic and chromatic ends of the harmonic spectrum with formal sections that compete for prominence until the murky chaos of the

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d'autres y voyaient carrément une allusion tragique –fin du second Empire, état de Wien après la guerre, etc. Tragique, cette danse peut l'être comme tout expression—volupté, joie—poussée à l'extrême. Il ne faut y voir que ce que la musique y exprime: une progression ascendante de sonorité, à laquelle la scène viendra ajouter celle de la lumière et du mouvement." *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 205-6.

<sup>475</sup> Ravel, interview by André Révész, *ABC de Madrid*, 1 May 1924, reprinted and translated in *Ravel Reader*, 434. The interview is not reprinted in *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*.

<sup>476</sup> Yaraman, *Revolving Embrace*, 108.

<sup>477</sup> Deborah Mawer, "Ravel and the Apotheosis of the Dance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151, 154.

opening returns (R54), first subsuming, then supplanting the chain of waltzes. This view is supported by Orenstein, who speaks of the “‘fatal whirling’ [which] begins to impose itself” as the work progresses.<sup>478</sup>

Ravel’s brief argument for the ballet, included in the preface to the Durand score, sketches choreographic events only through the end of the first waltz, leaving the remaining narrative indeterminate:

Through clearing, swirling clouds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. The clouds disperse gradually: we discern [at letter A] an immense hall populated by a whirling crowd. The scene is illuminated by degrees. At the *fortissimo* [letter B], light from the chandeliers radiates forth. An imperial court, around 1855.<sup>479</sup>

The muffled rumbling of the opening forms a striking contrast with the shimmering D Major waltz (W1), the first in a suite of five waltzes that unfold in succession, with numbers three, four, and five separated by an *Eingang* (E1, E2), a transitional section in a Straussian waltz, traditionally demarcated by double bar lines.<sup>480</sup> Interpreters like Lindenlaub suggest that the waltzes portray life, light, pre-War glamour—themes that seem to vanquish the ominous forces of the opening. As the work progresses, the

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<sup>478</sup> George Benjamin, “Last Dance,” *The Musical Times* 135 (July 1994): 432-35; Mawer, “Ravel and the Apotheosis,” 154; Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 189. The phrase “fatal whirling” was Ravel’s own; it appears in his “Autobiographical Sketch.” See *Ravel Reader*, 32; *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 46. More recently, Mawer has developed an interpretation of *La Valse* that weaves together the music, Balanchine’s production, and thematic similarities with Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death.” She entertains a connection with the grotesque as well, although she essentially equates the phenomenon with the macabre. See Mawer, “Balanchine’s ‘La Valse,’” 106-113.

<sup>479</sup> “Arguments de ballet de Ravel,” in *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 385. “Des nuées tourbillonnantes laissent entrevoir, par éclaircies, des couples de valseurs. Elles se dissipent peu à peu: on distingue une immense salle peuplée d’une foule tournoyante. La scène s’éclaire progressivement. La lumière des lustres éclate au *fortissimo*. Une Cour impériale, vers 1855.” The manuscript that contained a more thorough description of the scenario is lost.

<sup>480</sup> Yaraman, *Revolving Embrace*, 96, 106-7.

waltzes are interrupted with increasing frequency and insistence by dissonant passages, bold dynamics, and raucous orchestrations. At first, the waltzes return undeterred, lulling the listener into nostalgic reveries that rock and swirl with the ceaseless motion of the dance. Yet at last the waltzes, fatally unhinged, whirl free from their orbit in a chaotic crush of sound, collapsing abruptly.

Though Ravel repeatedly characterized the work as the aesthetic play of sound and movement, his rejection of a programmatic narrative shaped by conflict is at odds with the experience of scholars and listeners. Indeed, the work's integration of phrase symmetry and asymmetry, diatonicism and chromaticism, regular triple rhythms and hemiola, positions these musical phenomena in binary oppositions; these, in turn, generate interpretations driven by communal wounds, unified by tragedy and longing. One particular strand of criticism that emerges in the 1930s presents the conflict-driven character of *La Valse* in a different light, merging oppositions into a single effect: complex in its unexpected simplicity.

In his 1920 review, Poueigh assessed the work's adaptability to choreographic interpretation, predicting that "before long, *La Valse* will return to us in the trunks of some ballet company—Russian, Swedish, indeed French, if not Lappish or Iroquois."<sup>481</sup> Yet it was the concert version of the work that flourished: in 1930 alone, it appeared on twenty-one concerts reviewed in French publications.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Poueigh, "Les Grands Concerts," 2. "Gageons qu'avant longtemps, *La Valse* nous reviendra dans les bagages de quelque compagnie de ballets russes, suédois, voire français, sinon lapons ou iroquois."

<sup>482</sup> Laurence Pechard, "Présence de Ravel dans les concerts parisiens en 1930 d'après *Le Ménestrel* et *Le Monde musical...La Valse*," *Revue internationale de musique française* 24 (November 1987): 84.

Though some reviews embellished the critical themes of the 1920s—*La Valse* as a musical allegory for recent political and cultural events—others addressed the sensual and psychological effects of the work, sometimes linking them with drug-induced or hallucinatory states.<sup>483</sup> Pierre Capdevielle described the work as a “hallucinatory fresco”<sup>484</sup> in his April 1930 review for *Le Monde musical*; in an essay on Ravel’s “choreographic poems” written later that year, he noted that after bewitching its audience, *La Valse* “infuses us with a sort of nervous exasperation, almost opiated, and undoubtedly phantasmagoric.”<sup>485</sup> In merging vision, sensation, and the intellectual processes of hyper-stimulation, Capdevielle suggests that the work disorients its listener by inducing synesthesia.

Critics repeatedly evoked *vertige* in the 1930 reviews: Adolphe Piriou described the “vertiginous vision” of *La Valse*, while Capdevielle sketched its “vertiginous round dance where, at the paroxysm, languor and voluptuousness tragically seem to unite in a final whirling.”<sup>486</sup> One performance, conducted by

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Of the 21 performances, thirteen were held in Paris, five in other French cities and Monte Carlo. The orchestral version of the work was most commonly performed.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Pierre Capdevielle, review of Madeleine de Valmalète, *Le Monde musical* (30 April 1930).

<sup>485</sup> Capdevielle, “Deux Poèmes Choreographic de Maurice Ravel,” *Le Monde musical* (30 June 1930): 249. “Après nous avoir envoûtés, insatisfaites, elles nous transfusent une sorte de névrose exaspérée, presque opiacée, indubitablement fantasmagorique.”

<sup>486</sup> Adolphe Piriou, review of *La Valse*, *Le Monde musical* (31 May 1930): 199; Capdevielle, review of Madeleine de Valmalète. “Dans *La Valse*, la débauche sonore nous gris, nous envoûte et nous entraîne dans une ronde vertigineuse où langueur et la volupté semblent, au paroxysme, s’unir tragiquement dans un ultime tournoiement.”

Gaston Poulet, benefited from a “vertiginous execution”<sup>487</sup>; another rendered the evening unforgettable by wrapping up the evening in a “dizzying fashion.”<sup>488</sup> References to both synesthesia and *vertige* indicate critical acknowledgment of the work’s tendency to fuse disparate experiences into a single psychological or sensational effect.<sup>489</sup> They also echo Ravel’s 1924 remarks to *ABC de Madrid*, which added *vertige* to the experiential stew discussed in his previous interpretations: “Certainly, *La Valse* is tragic, but in the Greek sense: it is a fatal spinning around, the expression of vertigo and of the voluptuousness of the dance to the point of paroxysm.”<sup>490</sup>

### **Motivic and Harmonic Unity**

Listeners who apprehend *La Valse* as a struggle between present and past may hear in the work’s opening the musical equivalent of primordial ooze: a time before memory and culture, where obscurity gives way to order. The transition from motivic fragments to melodies, irregular to binary phrase lengths, and harmonic searching to tonal stability reflects on a larger formal scale the E-F antagonism of the phrase level, where the double bass, harp, and timpani engage in a contest for pitch priority. For the first 35 measures, the bass section executes a three-way divisi: two-thirds perform

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<sup>487</sup> Pechard, “Présence de Ravel,” 84.

<sup>488</sup> Syp., review of concerts in Nantes, *Le Monde musical* (31 March 1930): 123. “...et enfin, la *Valse* folle et endiablée de Ravel, enlevée de façon étourdissante...”

<sup>489</sup> Pechard identifies psychological effect as a key characteristic of the 1930s reviews in *Le Monde musical* and *Le Ménestrel*. See “Présence de Ravel,” 86.

<sup>490</sup> Ravel, interview with Révész, in *Ravel Reader*, 434.

tremolos oscillating from E to F and E to A flat, while one-third plays an accented E on the downbeat, followed by an F on beat two. At the same time, the harp and timpani enter every third beat on F, creating a mild density accent as the harp plucks four strings simultaneously (Example 8.1).<sup>491</sup>

**Example 8.1. “Oppositional” bass and tremolo haze in *La Valse*, opening–R3/11.**

The musical score for Example 8.1 consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Harp (hp.), the middle for the Cello (Cb.), and the bottom for the Timpani (timp.). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The Harp staff shows a tremolo pattern of E and F. The Cello staff shows a tremolo pattern of E and F. The Timpani staff shows a single note on F. The score is marked with 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'p' (piano).

Divisi cellos join the bass tremolos in measure nine, while violin and viola enter intermittently with tremolos, glimmering briefly before fading out. When the bassoons enter at R1 with a melodic motive seeking stable harmonic turf, the accompanying instruments refuse to grant it; both the E-F exchange and the attendant haze of tremolos in the strings persist undeterred. Stability arrives at R9 when the first waltz enters in D. The opening previews the compartmental organization of *La*

<sup>491</sup> Technically the harpist plays two E#s and two Fs. Idiosyncrasies of the instrument allow a composer to treat enharmonic pitches as distinct, since there are natural, sharp, and flat forms for each string; in this case, applying the sharp pedal to the E string while playing the F string simultaneously.

*Valse*, in which varying degrees of musical stability and instability generate perceptions of opposition that Ravel skillfully and surreptitiously undermines—a point demonstrated by his treatment of a central rhythmic motive.

Beginning in measure 12, the bassoons present the work's first quasi-melodic material, "cinematically edited glimpses of future themes...irregularly interspersed with stretches of suspended inertia."<sup>492</sup> The upper voice of the two-measure motive outlines a tritone that pivots around D; harmonically, Ravel divides a D half-diminished seventh chord among the bassoons, employing the same partitioning for successive appearances (see Example 8.2, with the opening motive in the first and third phrases). The next three bassoon entrances feature dominant seventh chords on D-flat, B-flat, and G (excluding the fifth)—three of the four harmonic nodes in octatonic Collection I.<sup>493</sup> With the exception of C-natural, the pitch field of the opening 35 measures is completely referable to Collection I, with all eight pitches exploited harmonically in either the bassoon motives or the accompanying string tremolos.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> Benjamin, "Last Dance," 432.

<sup>493</sup> My numbering of the three octatonic collections correlates with Pieter van den Toorn's. See *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 49.

<sup>494</sup> Steven Baur considers the influence of Franco-Russian octatonicism on Ravel from his student days through his compositions of 1908, including *Rapsodie espagnole*. He does not mention *La Valse*, but his analyses of earlier works show Ravel manipulating octatonicism in similar ways. A contentious but useful public communication between Baur and Pieter C. van den Toorn highlights both the neglect of Ravel's music in theoretical applications of octatonicism and the problem of Ravel's historical position in relation to Debussy, Stravinsky, and other contemporary composers. Baur argues that while scholars often consider Ravel the recipient of their influence, the reverse was often the case. See Baur, "Ravel's 'Russian' Period: Octatonicism in His Early Works, 1893-1908," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52 (Autumn 1999): 531-592; Van den Toorn (Letter to the Editor) and Baur (reply to Van den Toorn), *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53 (Summer 2000): 445-50.



8.2. Octatonic Collection I in opening motive and its answers, from R1–R3. Four nodes shown in boxes.

The musical score is written in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system shows the opening motive with four nodes boxed: B<sup>b</sup>7, R1/5, R1/1, and R3/5. The second system shows the first answer with four nodes boxed: D<sup>#</sup>7, B<sup>b</sup>7, R3/1, and G7. The third system shows the second answer with four nodes boxed: B<sup>b</sup>7, R1/5, R1/1, and R3/5. The score is written in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature.

A harp glissando leads to a transition at R5, which initiates the gradual shift from octatonic to predominantly tonal harmony. Though cast in the same mold as the waltz themes that follow, the transition draws from a pitch collection similar to that of the opening; two important changes, however, include the introduction of A-natural and the enharmonic substitution of A# for B-flat, both of which occur two measures before the transition. The opening motive, transferred from the bassoons to divisi violas, incorporates these variations in the harmonic landscape by exchanging the tritone in the upper voice for perfect fourths and fifths (Example 8.3).

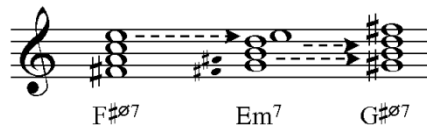
### 8.3. Rhythmic motive at R1/1-2 (opening) and R5/1-5 (transitional theme).

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff, labeled 'R1' and 'Bsn.', is in 3/4 time and features a melody starting on a low D (with a flat), moving to a half note on E-flat, then a quarter note on F, and ending with a half note on G-flat. The dynamic marking is *mp*. The bottom staff, labeled 'R5' and 'Vla.', is also in 3/4 time and shows a more complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a chromatic ascent. The dynamic marking is *p*. Both staves have a treble clef and a key signature of one flat.

Moreover, the A-natural that initiates the transition at R5 is a fifth above the D in the bass, establishing tonal precedence for the harmonic relationship that emerges five measures later (R6) when the pedal point on E acts as the V/V of D major, preparing the arrival of the first waltz in that key. Rather than evoking octatonic relationships through dominant seventh chords placed at harmonic nodes, Ravel strings together seventh chords organized by voice-leading: chiefly, common tones, conjunct movement between chords, and an ascending chromatic line in the lowest

melodic voice. Example 8.4 provides a harmonic reduction of the five-measure progression beginning at R5, preserving the inversions of each chord.

**Example 8.4. Voice-leading progression by seventh chord (R5/1-5).**



The violas take over the bassoons' opening motive with paired statements that form a brief, lyrical melody (see Example 8.3 above). Performance directions further distinguish the melody from its earlier motivic counterpart: ephemeral tremolos played *sur la touche* (on the fingerboard) give way to the transitional melody performed *jeu ordinaire* (as usual) with occasional portamento. Shades of D major accompany a new character in the music—suave, buoyant, and refined, presenting a sharp contrast with the dissonant tremolos and fragmented melodic questioning of the opening. Had Ravel wanted to heighten this contrast, he might have introduced a new theme with a character distinct from the opening bassoon motive. Instead, he varies the motive's intervallic content, orchestration, and phrase structure while sneaking its rhythms into the transitional melody fully intact. In fact, Ravel transfers the motive's complete rhythmic profile, including the slurs that identify rhythmic groupings. Despite marked differences in character between the opening and transition, rhythmic invariance from motive to melody seems to dissolve rather than dramatize structural boundaries.

The transition marks the first of many instances in which Ravel manipulates the opening rhythmic motive to maintain unity in both structure and effect. After associating it with the haunting disorientation of the opening and the winsome elegance of the transition, Ravel presents it in yet another context—a swaggering, celebratory statement that occurs six times in succession at the end of the second waltz (W2), from R16-17B (Example 8.5). The motive’s muted rumbling in the opening could hardly be more different than its triumphant flourishing at 17B, the moment when “light from the chandeliers radiates forth” to banish earlier shadows from memory. Ravel challenges inclinations to interpret these disparate characters in oppositional terms, exchanging motivic transformation for evident similarity.

**Example 8.5. Successive presentations of the opening rhythmic motive.<sup>495</sup>**

The image displays four musical staves, each representing a different presentation of a rhythmic motive. The first staff, labeled R16, is in 3/4 time and features a triplet of eighth notes marked with a 'V' and a 'mf' dynamic. The second staff, labeled R17B, is in 3/4 time and features a dotted quarter note marked with a 'ff' dynamic. The third staff, labeled R88, is in 3/4 time and features a dotted quarter note with a flat, marked with a 'f' dynamic. The fourth staff, labeled R66, is in 3/4 time and features a dotted quarter note with a flat, marked with a 'p' dynamic. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

<sup>495</sup> The motives are aligned by rhythmic similarity; also compare each with Example 7.3, which shows the motive’s presentation in the opening and transitional theme.

The same motive that thrives in disorienting and celebratory contexts also participates in the gradual disintegration of the waltz. Following a recapitulation of sorts (R54), the motive returns in the oboes and flutes at R66, yoking two pairs of measures into binary phrases, just as it did in the transition. With a slur in R66/1 connecting the eighth note to the two notes that follow, Ravel recalls the same pattern employed in both the opening and the transition. When the motive returns at R68, several instruments alternately conspire to disrupt its phrase symmetry and predictable accent patterns. Offbeat entrances obscure the triple waltz rhythm, while phrase extensions expand the binary phrase first to three, then four measures in length. The motive survives further disruptions at R88, where its emphatic repetition alternates with chromatic tone clusters; by R97, it achieves a heft unmatched in volume or instrumental forces, charged with an electric energy that propels the music recklessly towards the coda.

Whether ominous or elegant, triumphant or tragic, the rhythmic motive transcends musical character and context. Alterations to it are slight—a shortening of duration here, an implied downbeat there—and scarcely noticeable given the tempo and whirling machinery of the dance. Though Ravel sometimes fragments or interrupts the motive, he does so irrespective of formal constraints, preventing an association between motivic dissolution and structural instability: instances of fragmentation, for example, occur in the opening and transition, at R69, and R93. The attractive, repetitive force of the motive thus overcomes the formal repulsion of

contrasting sections, making the effect not one of disparate dualities, but rather a union of opposites.

Many listeners and critics have perceived Ravel's genteel waltzes as contrasting with the opening and the climax through adversarial exchanges of consonance and dissonance, harmonic stability and instability, symmetrical and asymmetrical phrase structures. Yet Ravel's disruptions of tonal language are apparent from the very first waltz, in which a Straussian framework—a melody harmonized in thirds and supported by alternating V-I bass movement—is continuously under assault by chromatic passing tones. (See Example 8.6, in which dissonant intervals and cross relations are indicated with arrows in the top system.) Intersections among tremolos and arpeggiated figures produce minor seconds and tritones, with these same intervals occurring between the viola melody and its accompaniment. Registral transfers through three octaves of arpeggios carve jagged melodic sevenths (G# down to A) and ninths (A down to G#), further emphasizing both harmonic dissonance and cross-relations.

Ravel's passing tones occur with enough frequency and registral variation to command the listener's attention, inviting a challenge to their accompanimental status. During moments of rest in the melody, minor-second tremolos in the low strings emerge into the foreground (see the fourth measure of Example 8.6), interrupting the string of consonant thirds and recalling the dissonant haze of tremolos from the opening—music that seems remote in the midst of binary phrases, lyrical

melodies, and gaudy portamento. Seeds of darkness and uncertainty from the opening bear fruit in W1, foreshadowing the apocalyptic clash to come.

### 8.6. Dissonant passing tones and cross-relations in Waltz 1, R9/4-11.

The image displays a musical score for measures 9 through 11 of Waltz 1, in 3/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The score is arranged for five instruments: Viola (Vla.), Bassoon (B.cl.), Contrabass (Cb.), Bassoon (B.cl.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The notation is in bass clef. Measures 9 and 10 feature complex harmonic textures with dissonant passing tones and cross-relations. Arrows indicate specific intervals, including an 8th (octave) and a 9th (ninth). The Viola part has a long, sustained note in measure 9. The Bassoon and Contrabass parts have rapid, descending and ascending lines. The Violoncello part has a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. Measure 11 shows a continuation of these textures, with the Viola part ending on a sustained note.

The third waltz (W3) similarly demonstrates that the dance's polished sheen is rarely free from dissonant blemishes. Like W1, arpeggios accompany the waltz melody, with occasional cross-relations biting into tonal harmonies, though W3 also incorporates dissonance within the leaps and bends of the melody itself. The demure charm of W3 abuts the first Eingang (E1), whose precarious exuberance portends the waltz's fragmentation and destruction. Just as Ravel could have heightened the

contrast between the opening section and the waltz transition by employing different motives for each, so too could he have chosen to underscore an oppositional relationship between W3 and E1. He might have accomplished this by writing a melody in Straussian homage, trading chromaticism for consonance and articulated third beats for strengthened downbeats. (Example 8.7 shows a Straussian recomposition of the melody, as well as a rhythmically simplified version.) Ravel's melody may well be an homage, but it is also a virtual parody of Strauss, deliberately emphasizing melodic discord: the largest leaps are pungent major sevenths rather than sixths, while the bassline, which grounds tonic and dominant harmonies throughout the passage, begins each statement with a tritone.

**Example 8.7. In (a), W3 melody (R18/1-7). In (b) and (c), recompositions à la Strauss.**

The image displays three musical staves, each in 3/4 time, illustrating different versions of a melody. Staff (a) shows the original W3 melody (R18/1-7), characterized by a chromatic and disjunct line with frequent leaps. Staff (b) presents a recomposition à la Strauss, which is more stepwise and rhythmic, with a simplified melodic contour. Staff (c) shows another recomposition, further simplifying the rhythm and emphasizing the downbeats, resulting in a more consonant and grounded melody.



### **Disjunctive Equilibrium: Rhythm, Meter, and Harmony**

Ravel's weaving of dissonant threads into consonant textures did little to affect the perception of listeners intent upon hearing a struggle between light and darkness, glamour and decay. Perhaps the work's cumulative tendency towards chromaticism overrides the sectional integration of chromatic and diatonic: the first waltz's chronological distance from the coda makes it seem harmonically benign, or even wholly consonant. The work's phrase structure supports such a hearing, as the violent disruption in the work's final act (following its "recapitulation") dislodges the waltz's repetitive, binary phrases from the musical machinery.

In Ravel's earlier works, temporal processes—including rhythm, meter, tempo, and disjunctive relationships between temporalities—prove essential in characterizing the grotesque through the collision and fusion of contradictory elements. *La Valse* is no different in this respect. Rhythmic and metric interactions both organize and destabilize, underscoring the point that harmony alone struggles to make: the work's oppositional material is not merely juxtaposed, but integrated, generating the vertiginous disorientation that listeners ascribe to musical, historical, or aesthetic struggle. Though the audience experiences cumulative instability, rhythmic and metric irregularities prevail throughout the work, they are no more prominent in its latter stages. In many instances, Ravel develops an inverse relationship between harmonic and rhythmic/metric stability, introducing greater chromaticism in metrically stable passages and vice versa.

Though the bassline turf war in the opening of *La Valse* is waged as much about meter as pitch, the first eleven measures sound metrically indistinct. Accents help articulate the meter, but the tremolos in the low strings, played *pianissimo* with mutes, provide just enough harmonic fog to ensure that measured notes barely register. By R1, however, the meter immediately comes into focus: the bassoons introduce a quarter-note pulse that aligns with the E-F bass exchange, helping to clarify the meter. Repetition of the bassoon's rhythmic motive further stabilizes the meter, though an impression of instability persists—reinforced, perhaps, by prismatic shifts in timbre and harmonies without a tonal center. Though motivic fragmentation creates pairs of slurred duple groupings at R4 (Example 8.8), the opening motive returns at R5 with its rhythmic integrity intact; the arrival of D in the bass offers the added benefit of greater harmonic stability.

**Example 8.8. Motivic fragmentation and duple groupings, R4/1-4.**



Yet even as harmonic progressions point towards tonal order, disruptive rhythmic patterns steer the transition away from placid equilibrium. Syncopation in the strings and flutes at R6 creates a binary division of the measure (Example 8.9); at R7, the paired duple groupings that signify motivic fragmentation in the opening re-emerge in the strings, presenting two complete statements of the motive before

yielding to the same fragmentary impulse (Example 8.10). The last five measures of the opening are marked by increased metric ambiguity produced by tremolos in the basses, duple groupings, and hemiola. If the transition's inertia is measured by its movement towards stability, then no progress has been achieved. Any gains made harmonically are counterbalanced by rhythmic irregularities: tactics borrowed from the opening, but employed in the transition with greater frequency.

**Example 8.9. Binary and ternary metric divisions, R6/1-2.**

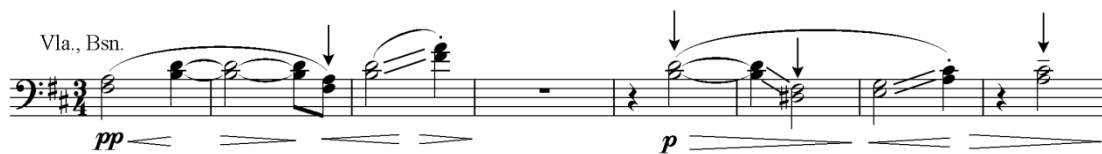
**Example 8.10. Hemiola and motivic fragmentation, R7/1-7.**

In some ways, the transition's anticipated call to order is realized in the first waltz, which programmatically introduces the dancing couples seen through dissipating clouds. Tonic harmonies prevail in the first six measures, followed by dominant seventh chords in the next four; the tonal scheme is generally straightforward, tinted with seventh chords from a predominantly diatonic palette. The bassline remains fixed on the first, second, and fifth scale degrees, underpinning mostly tonic and dominant harmonies. Within this framework, chromatic passing tones—featured prominently and infusing the texture throughout—demand more than their share of the listener's attention. Rhythmic grouping patterns pose the greater threat, undermining the steady, predictable waltz rhythms relentlessly pursued by the low strings. The waltz opens with an accompaniment pattern taken up by the cello and bass clarinet, which alternate with an eighth note figure that fills one measure of triple meter. Ravel preserves the figure throughout the waltz, shifting it to different instruments to ensure that it remains a novel sound, less likely to be tuned out over time.

When the melody first enters (R9/4), its rhythms and contours seem unremarkable—a perception borne out through its multiple statements, as the listener discovers that it consists entirely of diatonic pitches. The melody conforms to triple meter, although rhythmic/metric interactions suggests that the fit is less comfortable than it could be. In the antecedent phrase (R9/4-7), a quarter note tied across the barline weakens the downbeat of the second measure (Example 8.11, syncopated entrances indicated with arrows). The first measure of the consequent phrase (R9/8)

begins with a rest on the downbeat, followed by the syncopated, accented entrance of the melody on beat two. This initiates a pattern that repeats in the next measure: the half note tied over the barline creates a syncopated second beat, which recurs two measures later when a rest appears on the downbeat. The melody's rhythmic flexibility enables a hearing that resists the lulling metric accents of the accompaniment.

**Example 8.11. Syncopation and weakened downbeats in Waltz 1 melody, R9/4-11).**



Duple groupings resolve the rhythmic irregularities of the first four measures (R9/4-7), with the third-beat quarter notes becoming the first pulse in each grouping (Example 8.12). Although the rest in the fourth measure seems to suspend binary organization, a quarter note on the second beat of the accompaniment suggests its continuation; in his solo piano version, Ravel places this accompanimental chord in the right hand with the melody, making the rhythmic association between them more explicit.

If the duple groupings continue across the measure of rest, then the accompanying quarter note falls on a strong pulse, while the first note of the melody's consequent phrase—a half note (R9/8)—occurs on a weak one. Given the half note's

agogic accent, its position in the perceived duple grouping seems egregiously misplaced. This rhythmic organization is no more disruptive, however, than the written metric accents, which similarly place the half note in a weakened position. When extended through the consequent phrase, the duple groupings resolve many of the rhythmic and metric tensions inherent in triple meter: the next three half notes align with strong pulses, and the staccato quarter note—the first in a duple grouping—no longer sounds like a syncopated neighbor. When written in 2/4 (Example 8.13), the passage easily conforms to the new meter.

**Example 8.12. Duple groupings in W1 melody, R9/4-11.**

Example 8.12 shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Vla., Bsn.' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Cb. (Accomp.)'. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 3/4. The melody in the top staff consists of eighth and quarter notes, with duple groupings indicated by brackets and numbers 1 and 2 above the notes. The accompaniment in the bottom staff consists of chords and rests.

**Example 8.13. In (a), W1 re-barred in 2/4. In (b), original barring.**

Example 8.13 shows two versions of the musical passage. Version (a) is labeled '(a)' and version (b) is labeled '(b)'. Both versions are for two staves: 'Vla., Bsn.' on top and 'Cb.' on the bottom. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). In version (a), the top staff is re-barred in 2/4, with the melody consisting of eighth and quarter notes. In version (b), the top staff is in 3/4, with the melody consisting of eighth and quarter notes. The bottom staff in both versions consists of chords and rests.

The melodic rhythms of W1's opening eight measures cycle twice more before the second waltz appears. Dissonance fades in W2 (R13/2), along with the chromatic passing tones that figure so prominently in W1. Rhythmic irregularity persists, however, ensuring that the dance remains delicately off-kilter. The new theme, lushly orchestrated with harp glissandi and sweeping string portamento, bisects the measure at first, conflicting with the ternary division of the accompaniment. After four measures, Ravel shifts to the conventional triple division of the meter before introducing a series of metrically ambiguous figures—rhythmic cousins to the opening theme of W1 whose syncopation may be similarly resolved with duple re-barring (Example 8.14).

**Example 8.14. In (a), Waltz 2 melody re-barréd in 2/4, R14/4-9. In (b), original barring.**

The image displays two musical staves, (a) and (b), for the melody of Waltz 2, measures 14/4-9. Both staves are in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. The instrumentation is Flute (Fl.) and Violin I (Vln. I).  
 Staff (a) shows the melody re-barréd in 2/4. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half).  
 Staff (b) shows the original barring. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half). The original barring is indicated by a '3' over the first three measures and a '4' over the last two measures.

The potential for resolution presented by binary rhythmic groupings ultimately complicates rhythmic and metric relationships in the first and second waltzes. While the listener tends to smooth out rhythmic irregularities by hearing duple groupings, the unwavering 3/4 in the accompaniment merely shifts metric conflict from competing organizations of triple meter to rival arrangements of duple

and triple patterns; the slurs support either arrangement, providing no additional clarification. Both perceptual approaches manifest rhythmic and metric tensions, and the listener, content with neither, vacillates between them.

The rhythmic conceit explored in W1 and W2 gains greater purchase in Waltz 3, where chromatic passing tones in the accompaniment and disjunct leaps in the melody challenge the stability of the tonal center. While the strings maintain a steady triple meter accompaniment, the oboe introduces a series of dotted quarter–eighth note motives that comprise most of the eight-measure melody (R18/1-8). Repetition of the motive impresses duple groupings upon the listener’s mind; an accented third beat in the melody’s first and third measures, followed by syncopated downbeats in the second and fourth, reinforce that impression (Example 8.15). Hemiola appears continuously through four successive statements of the melody, from R18 to R22: the second and fourth feature variations to the consequent phrase that maintain the same rhythmic and metric relationships. As with W1, Ravel’s articulations alternately support duple and triple arrangements.

**Example 8.15. Waltz 3 hemiola in (a) with consequent phrase variant in (b), R18/1-8 and R19/5-8.**

The image displays two musical staves, (a) and (b), in 3/4 time. Staff (a) is for Oboe (Ob.) and shows a melody of eighth notes. The first four measures are grouped by brackets labeled '2', indicating a hemiola pattern where two eighth notes are beamed together to represent a single beat. The melody continues with eighth notes and rests. Staff (b) shows a variant for English Horn (En.H.) and Oboe (Ob.). It also features beamed eighth notes with '2' markings, but includes a final measure with a different rhythmic structure, including a quarter rest.



In the first *Eingang* (R26), Ravel maintains the equilibrium between rhythm and harmony that he established early in the work. The first five measures are typical: a blend of diatonic and chromatic harmonies referable to a tonic—in this case, B-flat—which are best described through voice-leading procedures rather than tonal functions. In the first two measures, the fundamental tonic gives rise to chord variants that emerge through the chromatically ascending inner voice (from E to A-flat) of the horns and trombones—precisely the same technique Ravel features in the transition at R5, where harmonic progressions occur through the chromatic, conjunct movement of the lowest melodic voice.

The passage veers away from the dactylic accompaniment characteristic of the waltz, presenting the work's first truly destabilizing rhythmic event. Ravel establishes duple groupings in the opening phrase of E1 through repeated rhythmic patterns in the first three measures, followed by a syncopated second-beat entrance in the fifth measure, R26/5 (Example 8.16). Though these homorhythmic groupings seem to underscore the waltz's temporary exit, similar rhythmic patterns are pervasively employed in the opening three waltzes. By the time E1 arrives, repetitive duple groupings have so saturated the texture of the earlier waltzes that the listener expects their continuation. In addition, these groupings, previously heard with the dactylic rhythms of the waltz, paradoxically imply the presence of waltz time through its absence. Though presenting the illusion of something new, surprising, and potentially unstable, E1 is constructed from the rhythmic and harmonic devices that unified previous sections, again creating continuity across formal boundaries.

**Example 8.16. Duple groupings and harmonic functions in *Eingang*, R26/1-5.**

In the waltz that follows (W4), Ravel continues to simplify rhythmic and metric relationships in the wake of increased chromaticism; the duple groupings that signified metric ambiguity before reversing course in the *Eingang* largely retreat from the music. In many respects, W4 resembles W1: like the arpeggiated accompaniment of the first waltz, a continuous series of chromatic passing tones permeates over two-thirds of W4, alternating and blending cellos, clarinets, and flutes to prevent the listener from growing acclimated to any single timbre (Example 8.17). While W1 avoided dissonant intervals on downbeats, W4 introduces them on every pulse of most measures: tritones on alternate downbeats, cross-relations on second beats, and tritones on third beats (R30-R33). The circular, repetitive unspooling of accompanimental figures injects new rhythmic activity into a texture already dosed with chromaticism. The waltz melody's rhythms emphasize the same dactylic pattern as the accompaniment, with agogic and tonic accents on the downbeats of the first and third measures. Embedded within the melody is a repeated quarter note motive whose contours articulate the measure's boundaries (see R30/4-6 in Example 8.17).

**Example 8.17. Passing dissonance and motivic repetition in W4, R30/1-8.**

The musical score for Example 8.17 is arranged in two systems. The first system contains three staves: Vln. I (Violin I), Vc. (Violoncello), and a combined Cb. (Contrabass) and Cl. (Clarinet) staff. The Vln. I staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes, and includes the dynamic marking *mf* and the instruction *expressif*. The Vc. staff is in bass clef and features a continuous chromatic accompaniment of eighth notes. The Cb./Cl. staff is also in bass clef and shows chords with upward-pointing arrows indicating articulation. The second system contains two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff continues the melodic line from the Vln. I staff, with fingerings 2, 2, and 2 indicated above the notes. The bass staff continues the chromatic accompaniment from the Vc. staff.

The fifth waltz (W5), beginning at R34, sheds the chromatic accompaniment of W4, but also toys with increased metric ambiguity. In the first phrase, a quarter note tied across the barline appears in three consecutive measures; the third-beat agogic and tonic accents give the impression of a displaced downbeat (Example 8.18). When the second *Eingang* (R36) intrudes with stacks of chromatic harmonies separated by strands of ascending chromatic scales, the balance of power between rhythm and harmony shifts dramatically (Example 8.19). Although the waltz rhythm disappears in the first measure of E2, it returns two measures later—a pattern repeated throughout as the homorhythmic opening motive alternates with the dactylic accompaniment. Remarkably, E2's instability may be attributed almost entirely to harmonic relationships: the passage consists of binary phrases throughout and the

triple meter is clearly articulated, avoiding both syncopation and ambiguous rhythmic groupings.<sup>496</sup>

**Example 8.18. Syncopation and displaced downbeat in Waltz 5 theme, R34/2-5.**



**Example 8.19. Chromaticism and metric stability in *Eingang*, R36/1-4.**



***Phantom Dualism: Chaos, Order, and Vertige***

The opening minutes of *La Valse* create indelible impressions on the listener and establish musical relationships that determine the work's course. Each waltz introduces or varies thematic material while reinforcing patterns of interaction between rhythm and harmony, music and perception. By E2, the listener has encountered the full range of patterns that will govern the remainder of the work; in the conclusion, however, these same patterns are perceived as cataclysm and chaos.

<sup>496</sup> At most, E2 includes indirect metric dissonance—for example, at R36/6-8, when the series of eighth notes gives way to triplet eighth notes, rearranging the division of the quarter note.

Prior to the final build-up, Ravel introduces a sixth waltz (W6), followed by transitional material recapitulating the opening, with the bassoons reprising their motivic role (compare R1 with R54). The most notable difference between the opening and its return is the truncated bassoon motive juxtaposed with the waltz transition—seamless stitching facilitated by rhythmic similarity between the opening and transitional motives. Much of the ensuing music derives from the composing out of the waltz transition, with interpolated phrases and sections drawn from W2, W4, and E2 before the final build-up at R76, marked “*un peu plus vif et en accelerant.*”

R76 opens with a tactic from W4: chromatic harmony, assisted by a looped chromatic figure in the bass, set against relative metric stability in both melody and accompaniment. Accented bassoon chords on the second beat present a challenge to the waltz’s rhythmic identity, but the melody, a reprise of W6, quells the opposition when it enters at R77 (Example 8.20). Agogic accents punctuate every downbeat; the eighth notes on the third beat serve as anacruses, reinforcing both the downbeat’s strength and the perception that the second-beat bassoon chords are quirky, but ultimately benign, rhythmic phenomena.

**Example 8.20. Metric stability in Waltz 6 melody, R77/1-5.**

B. cl./Vc.

*p*

Bsn.

In the build-up, Ravel obsessively churns out iterations of W6, whose modulations and gradually accelerating tempo belie its metric stability. From proliferating thickets of chromaticism, Ravel teases out linear gestures in the accompaniment, distinguished by contrary motion and distinct temporal cycles: the descending chromatic loop in the cello unspools once each measure, while ascending chromatic lines extend across phrases almost indefinitely (Example 8.21), animating the first statement of W6 but spilling over into successive iterations as well. The rate of ascent varies (R77-78) before leveling off at one chromatic pitch per measure—a pattern that holds until R83/5, when the rate triples as the waltz’s pace accelerates.

**Example 8.21. Linear chromatic ascents and descending chromatic loops in W6, R77/1-R78.**

The image shows a musical score for three staves: bass, tenor, and alto. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score is labeled with measures R77/1, 4, 6, 7, and R78. A dashed line connects the end of measure 7 to the beginning of measure R78, indicating a continuation of the chromatic line. The bass staff shows a descending chromatic loop, while the tenor and alto staves show ascending chromatic lines.

The chromaticism gradually thickens, in part because Ravel blends the predominantly chromatic ascent with linear and harmonic expressions of octatonicism. Collection III furnishes the harmony at R80, giving way to Collection II in R80/2-3 (Example 8.22). The next several measures alternate the three

collections, with additional chromatic pitches cluttering the harmonic landscape. Ravel exchanges the chromaticism of the looped figure for an explicitly octatonic reference at R80 (applying Collection III), though it regains its chromatic identity in the following measure. Example 8.23 shows the distribution of octatonic collections in the first four measures of R80.

**Example 8.22. Linear chromatic ascents and vertical octatonicism in W6, R80/1-8.**

R80/1                      3                      5                      7

Collection III

**Example 8.23. Octatonic harmony in W6, R80/1-4.**

Collection III                      Collection II

R80/1                      4                      R80/2                      3

The waltz's orbit, fueled by harmonic discord, shrinks through acceleration, its revolutions inching closer to the rotational pace of the chromatic loop, now heard as a harbinger of things to come. As harmony gives rise to chaos, however, meter stubbornly refuses to join it. Indeed, the meter grows more stable, with fewer passages of syncopation, hemiola, or metric displacement than almost any other section of the piece. From R85 to R97, Ravel reprises a series of themes in quick succession: a passage from W6 (at R85), a variation of the opening rhythmic motive (R88), and a newly orchestrated version of the theme from 17B, which portrays the moment when light illuminates the chandeliers. Although chromatic accretions continue to pressure tonal stability, the downbeats are usually accented, sustaining the frenetic but still recognizable lilt of the waltz. Transitory passages feature displaced downbeats (R93/4-9) and duple rhythmic groupings (R85/2-5, for example), but these still resemble the rhythmic and metric manipulations that appear in the first waltz. In many instances they seem less pervasive, and thus less destabilizing.

By R98, the familiar waltz themes depart, leaving behind great smears of reverberating din—pure gestures, bereft of melodic content—that likely inspired Lindenlaub's perception of Straussian death throes. Scalar chromatic sweeps alternate with sharply punctuated chords before the final *accelerando* at R100 (*pressez jusqu'à la fin*), where musical gestures become convulsive shudders unfolding through stuttering repetitions (Example 8.24). Remarkably, however, metric stability is maintained until the penultimate measure, when the bass finally breaks free from the waltz rhythm. Up to this point, Ravel differentiates the



downbeats from surrounding material through accents and registral positioning; at times, he reiterates the waltz's hierarchy of beats by following an accented downbeat with a half note chord, weakening the third beat. Even when Ravel shifts stress accents to the second beat (beginning one measure after R100), the downbeat retains its dominant profile; registrally separated from the rest of the measure, it provides the stable platform from which the stressed second beat rebounds. Chaos seems to reign in *La Valse*'s conclusion, but Ravel counterbalances the tumult of harmony and timbre with steady metric organization.

**Example 8.24. Stuttering gestures and chromaticism in stable metric frame, R100/1-R101/2.**

The musical score for Example 8.24 consists of two systems of piano music in 3/4 time. The first system contains measures 100/1 through 100/5, and the second system contains measures 101/1 through 101/5. The music features complex chords, triplets, and chromatic lines in both hands, with accents and slurs indicating specific phrasing and articulation.

The suave waltzes lull with distracting special effects—strings played *sur la touche*, harmonics, portamenti, glissandi—but despite their charm, they cannot exorcise the sinister spirit of the opening, with which they share common themes.

Dissonance, chromaticism, and distinctive rhythmic motives associated with darkness persist throughout *La Valse*, not in opposition to the waltzes but in harmony with them. Oppositional materials collide—with or without the listener’s recognition—as irregular rhythmic and metric phenomena coexist with binary and asymmetrical phrases, tonal and octatonic harmony, glossy and cacophonous orchestration. Through the whirl of the dance, at once sickening, dizzying, and exhilarating, the listener experiences a merging of physiological sensations: the irresistible *vertige* that accompanies the grotesque.

### **Perception and the Purloined Plot**

In repudiating interpretations of *La Valse* as “a struggle between life and death,” Ravel estranged himself from generations of critics and audiences, who overwhelmingly apprehend the work through the vocabulary of struggle. It is easy, and sometimes useful, to dismiss the composer’s own commentary on his works with the judgment that it is myopic, overly subjective, or irrelevant to the experiences of audiences who interact with the work itself, and not the intellect behind it. Yet accepting Ravel’s singular perception of *La Valse* as merely the product of the composer’s prerogative may obscure an important aesthetic force behind the work.

The perceptions that position Ravel and his interpreters in oppositional duality find parallels in Poe’s ratiocinative tale, “The Purloined Letter.” Parisian sleuth C. Auguste Dupin—a literary ancestor of Sherlock Holmes—is informed by the prefect of police that a nefarious Minister D has stolen an important letter, intending to use its

contents as blackmail. Finding the case impossible to crack, the prefect turns to Dupin for advice, describing his search for clues: he and his detectives had systematically dismantled the tops of tables and rungs of chairs, the space between mirrors and paved bricks, and found nothing. After taking in the prefect's travails (and noting with interest the offer of a "liberal reward" to anyone who solved the case), Dupin retrieves the letter from Minister's D's apartment. He discovers it in a card-rack in plain sight, disguised only by its tattered condition, which had led investigators to believe it was worthless old mail.<sup>497</sup>

The case of the purloined letter may be puzzling to readers familiar with detective stories: the crime and the criminal are known from the outset, and Dupin's manner of besting the criminal is both extremely elementary and potentially unethical. When the prefect of police expresses confusion about the case, he seems to be voicing the reader's own assessment of the tale: "The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair *is* so simple, and yet baffles us altogether."<sup>498</sup> Poe once wrote of the Dupin stories<sup>499</sup> that readers' perception of his craft differed considerably from his own: "I do not mean to say that [these tales] are not

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<sup>497</sup> "The Purloined Letter" may be a parody throughout; Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet have challenged the tale's earnestness by noting Dupin's many errors, undermining a narrative motivated by the detective's keen perceptual abilities. Even the Latin epigram which opens the story seems to promote irony over inquiry: "Nothing is more odious to wisdom than too much cunning." See Blythe and Sweet, "The Reader as Poe's Ultimate Dupe in 'The Purloined Letter,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (Summer 1989): 311-15.

<sup>498</sup> "The Purloined Letter," in *The Complete Poems and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Random House, 1965), 209.

<sup>499</sup> Besides "Purloined," there are two other Poe tales that feature the fictional detective: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (Dupin's début) and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt."

ingenious—but people think them more ingenious than they are—on account of their method and air of method.”<sup>500</sup>

If the grotesque overcomes *La Valse*’s dualism through *vertige*, Poe’s statement on effect and craft introduces a new duality, born not of formal conflict, aesthetic disjunction, or psychic anxiety, but of perception. In *La Valse*, listeners typically interpret the quiet restlessness of the opening, with its fragmented themes and disrupted phrase structures, as an introduction. We await harmonic stability, purposeful melodies, rhythmic regularity, and we receive it, to some degree, with the arrival of the first D major waltz, which provides “a sense of the real beginning.”<sup>501</sup> Swept up in the sensual, patrician elegance of the ballroom, we momentarily forget the chaotic coach ride that brought us there. At E1, we hear a hint of struggle with the waltz themes, a perception reinforced by E2, which grows more insistent, dissonant, and dangerously exuberant.

We now expect that the remainder of the work will showcase the struggle between light and dark, life and death, and we expect light to emerge victorious: prior experience with orchestral works, whether symphonic or programmatic, preconditions the concert hall audience to hear the work-as-struggle, as evidenced, for example, by Beethoven’s Third, Fifth, and Ninth Symphonies, Mahler’s Second, Third, and

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<sup>500</sup> *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 328.

<sup>501</sup> Mawer, “Ravel and the Apotheosis,” 153.

Eighth, and Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.<sup>502</sup> *La Valse* pays off dramatically, but not in the way we expect, tilting in favor of restless chaos before coming unhinged from the whirling vortex, ending in cataclysm rather than triumph. Just as Poe's conscientious dissembling encourages readers to revisit his tale for its "secret," so too does *La Valse* invite listeners to reinterpret perceptions formed in the first hearing.

One lesson Ravel learned from Poe is the manipulation of aesthetic effect, which subsumes both craft and its perception. Ravel, who claims not to have viewed *La Valse* as a struggle, constructed it in such a way that listeners could disagree; the work does alternate between buoyant waltzes and unsettled transitions before unleashing its lengthy dramatic climax. Yet he also subverts and manipulates expectations: motivic unity binds contrasting sections, while dissonant passing tones and melodic interruptions figure prominently in conventionally tonal waltzes. Rhythmic and metric irregularities paradoxically provide stability through their pervasive presence, reflecting the unity among disjunction found frequently in grotesque works.

Though listeners may treat the work's dark, restless opening as introductory, this section, like the first few paragraphs of "The Purloined Letter," tells all we need to know about how the remainder will unfold. Ravel's "method" in *La Valse* baffles through its simplicity: the disquiet inspired by the opening merely prefigures the howling ending, while the attractive waltzes and destructive climax may be grouped

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<sup>502</sup> *La Valse* was first introduced in the concert hall, and it is in this context that audiences know the work today. This is why, when comparing *La Valse* with other symphonic works that were likely familiar to contemporary audiences, I favor concert works over ballets.

as a grotesque effect. Yet the work's "air of method" fractures the effect, capitalizes on misplaced expectations, and suits up in battle armor to enact an aesthetic and formal struggle for the listener—a battle which, for Ravel, may not exist.

## CONCLUSION

Underpinning the pastoral sensuality of *Daphnis et Chloé*, the ironic humor of *L'Heure espagnole*, and the calculated *vertige* of *La Valse* is a single aesthetic effect that transcends Ravel's stylistic evolutions, identifying them as surface manifestations of his vibrant, lifelong interest in the grotesque. Two works excluded from this project—the piano triptych, *Gaspard de la nuit*, and the opera, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*—challenge the hermeneutic interpretations explored here. While this study represents Ravel's compositional styles and chronological development without *Gaspard* and *L'Enfant*, future research might reveal ways in which the grotesque interacts with other transient or invariable interests.

Ravel based *Gaspard* on a collection of prose poems by Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841), who derived his work's subtitle—*fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*—from the French translation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Contes fantastiques: fantaisies à la manière de Callot*, first published in Paris in 1829.<sup>503</sup> Bertrand's references to the grotesque in *Gaspard* include both his allusion to Callot and the second of the two prefaces, which evokes Hugo's preface to *Cromwell*: "Art always

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<sup>503</sup> Richards, *Without Rhyme or Reason*, 92, and John T. Wright, ed., preface to *Louis "Aloysius" Bertrand's Gaspard de la Nuit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), n.p. The German title of Hoffmann's book was *Phantasiestücke in Callots Manier*.

has two antithetical sides—a medallion which, for example, would resemble Paul [sic] Rembrandt on one side and Jacques Callot on the other.”<sup>504</sup>

As a genre, the prose poem is almost impossible to delimit: while its brevity suggests poetry and its syntax prose, it also combines a longer form more reminiscent of prose with the quasi-metrical cadence of poetry.<sup>505</sup> Like the paradoxical nature of prose poems, the structure of Bertrand’s *Gaspard* negotiates the aesthetics of unity amidst fragmentation. Its individual poems have little narrative thread binding them together, but the work’s structure—two prefaces with opening and closing dedicatory poems encasing its six books—creates a sort of frame that suggests poetic unity.<sup>506</sup> The poems themselves feature transgressive paratextual devices, hybrid forms, and the parodic piling on of romantic clichés: all elements that could inspire grotesque musical parallels.

Ravel’s *Gaspard* engages disjunctive temporal relationships typical of his other grotesque works: for example, the “moment time”<sup>507</sup> in “Le Gibet,” or the

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<sup>504</sup> Louis “Aloysius” Bertrand, second preface to *Gaspard de la nuit*, ed. Max Milner (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 79. “L’art a toujours deux faces antithétiques, médaille dont, par exemple, un côté accuserait la ressemblance de Paul Rembrandt, et le revers, celle de Jacques Callot.” Richards and Kathryn Slott view this reference as a parody of Hugo. See Richards, *Without Rhyme or Reason*, 92; Kathryn Slott, “Le Texte e(s)t son double. *Gaspard de la Nuit*: Intertextualité, Parodie, Auto-Parodie,” *French Forum* 6 (1 January 1981): 28-35.

<sup>505</sup> A number of devices, including repetition, rhyme, and irregular meters, help distinguish free verse from the prose poem; blank verse, which eliminates a rhyme scheme, may also be identified as poetry by its regular meter.

<sup>506</sup> Marvin Richards, *Without Rhyme or Reason: Gaspard de la nuit and the Dialectic of the Prose Poem* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998), 51.

<sup>507</sup> Jonathan Kramer describes moment time as a compositional and perceptual approach that favors stasis over process, generates self-contained, discontinuous units, and effaces beginnings and endings. See *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies* (New York: Schirmer, 1988), 50-55, 201-20.



ornamental arabesques in “Ondine” that expand with each iteration, threatening to spill into the next measure. Yet despite the work’s grotesque literary ancestry, the music did not evoke a parallel response from critics. This disparity, which is beyond the scope of the present study, needs to be addressed, as do the work’s aesthetic tensions between grotesque and arabesque.

The animated toys, animals, and automata in *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* exhibit transgressive hybridities that resemble those in *L’Heure espagnole*. The central character in *L’Enfant*, however, is a boy whose tantrum breathes life into the objects that inhabit his room; they, in turn, commiserate over the boy’s cruelty, taunting him until he collapses on the floor in exhaustion. This is a tale of enchantment gone awry: the fire hisses and spits, the grandfather clock dings madly, the fairy tale princess blames the child for losing her prince, and the math textbook spews forth a flurry of numbers and equations, rehearsed by a verbally nimble old man.

It might be argued that Ravel employs the grotesque as a tactic of alienation: by juxtaposing archaic and modern musical styles, he creates the disorienting *vertige* that distances the child from reality. At the same time, the grotesque may enact a strange enchantment for the audience, whose own memories of childhood transform their past into a place that never was. The unreality of their nostalgia mapped onto the theatrical experience could be said to create a shared aesthetic and experiential space that accepts both memory and magic as “real.” *L’Enfant*, like *L’Heure*, offers a meditation on time and mortality, with the impassive clocks of Torquemada’s shop here replaced by a singing clock. In André Hellé’s watercolor frontispiece to the

score, the specter of the grandfather clock looms over the room, while the contours of the armchair resemble a tombstone.<sup>508</sup>

Carolyn Abbate describes the phenomenon of illusion and disenchantment in Ravel's music generally, and *L'Enfant* in particular: "Those who transgress a border to the hidden places where such sounds can be heard discover only vulgarity, melancholy, and stupor." Through much of his career, Ravel was characterized by critics as a conjurer or a magician, creating musical illusions that conceal the ordinary artifices of their making.<sup>509</sup> Though no sorcerer's hand is visible in *L'Enfant*, its enchantments evoke the rich social and cultural history of magic in France, where a *début-de-siècle* fascination with society magicians led Guillaume Apollinaire to write a parody trick book full of spells, including a recipe for poetry.<sup>510</sup>

Simon During suggests a literary equivalent for the magic tricks popular in Ravel's time by referring to Poe, who shared with magicians with an interest in effect, cryptograms, and craft—the writer's trade secrets, learned through study and apprenticeship.<sup>511</sup> Writers of "literary secular magic" may deploy their own enchantments through carefully calibrated illusions—or, like Apollinaire, they may reject the association between creativity and the occult, preferring whimsical reality

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<sup>508</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 229.

<sup>509</sup> See, for example, Laloy's comment that Ravel's mind "is that of a sorcerer," or Lindenlaub's 1920 description of Ravel as a the "master magician." Louis Laloy, "La Musique [review of *Gaspard de la nuit*]," *La Grande revue* 53 (25 January 1909): 395; Lindenlaub, *À travers les concerts* [review of *La Valse*]."

<sup>510</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 178.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-183.

to the mystical unknown. Future work on *L'Enfant* might examine these forms of enchantment as cultural and aesthetic phenomena whose intersection with contemporary child psychology and constructions of childhood in literature may reveal relationships between literary “magic,” childhood fantasy, nostalgia, and the grotesque.

Debussy shared many interests with Ravel, as his works attest: the incomplete Poe operas, the piano suite *Children's Corner*, and the pastoral vision of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. If the grotesque proved a source of aesthetic continuity and renewal for Ravel, what role may it have played for his older contemporary? One year after the choreographic premiere of *Faune*, Debussy gave an interview that provides a glimpse of his perception of the grotesque. He described the ballet as a “grievous disappointment,” and then added:

I will spare you a description of the terror I felt at the dress rehearsal, when I saw that the Nymphs and the Faun were moving across the stage like marionettes, or rather, like figures cut from pasteboard, always presenting themselves frontally, with stiff, angular gestures, stylized on some grotesque archaic model!<sup>512</sup>

The association between the grotesque and a distant, alienated past, strangely animated by the artwork, recalls the archaism of Dorcon's dance in *Daphnis et Chloé*. For Debussy, however, these archaic reverberations are jarring: choreographic effigies of humanity that shatter the pastoral illusion, reminding the viewer of the very artifice the composer strives to conceal.

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<sup>512</sup> Quoted in Stephanie Jordan, “Debussy, the Dance, and the Faune,” in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 120.

Early in his career, Debussy's Symbolist ideals generated the circularity and stasis *Pelléas et Mélisande*, in which temporal distortions and orchestral interludes contribute to the opera's atmospheric obscurity, unfolding as if in a dream. Twenty years later, when Debussy expressed distaste for the grotesque characterizations in *Faune*, he also pointed out the widening aesthetic fissure that separated him from younger generations of French composers. Though the textural ambiguities of Debussy's music dissipated over time, its viscous tendencies remained: for Debussy, tonality was less undermined than melted in a simmering harmonic liquor. When conflicting temporalities emerged, they often blended to become indistinguishable, erasing the boundaries that originally defined them. Perhaps the grotesqueries in *Faune* were disconcerting for Debussy because they shared so little of his Symbolist preference for allusion over artifice. Ravel, on the other hand, favored synchronicity to dissolution, making constant reference to musical and temporal boundaries while simultaneously introducing the materials that disrupt them. A study of Debussy's grotesque may further illuminate the diverse ways in which he and Ravel manipulated similar source material.

### **The Artist and the Maelstrom**

Manuel Rosenthal once illustrated Ravel's antipathy to aesthetic coups d'état with an anecdote:

I asked him once if he could tell me the difference between evolution and revolution ... He said, 'Suppose that you are in a room, studying...; after a few hours you feel that the atmosphere is a little stuffy and you need to change the air, and you open the

window. You let the fresh air enter the room, after a while you close the window, that's all. That's evolution. You are in the room and you feel that you need a change of air, and you take a stone, put that through the window and break the window. Of course, the fresh air enters, but after that you have to repair the window. That's revolution.' And he said, 'I don't see myself the need to break a window; I know how to open it.'<sup>513</sup>

Preferring evolution to revolution, Ravel consistently adhered to norms, rarely abandoning the clarity of line for pure color; he was Ingres to Debussy's Delacroix, vexing those agitators of the avant-garde with his intractable classicism. At the same time, he was a notorious *enfant terrible*, riling up fellow students at the Conservatoire with his "uncommonly audacious"<sup>514</sup> music and snubbing the Prix de Rome jury with a cantata that contained several measures of parallel octaves and ended on a major seventh.<sup>515</sup> Long after his student days, Ravel remained interested in shocking audiences and deflating the bubble of turgid pretentiousness that encircled French musical academics; he never threw stones at windows, however, preferring to let the air in through subtler means. The grotesque was an aesthetic byway that allowed him to navigate these diverse paths, where tradition and innovation converge.

The title of *Sérénade grotesque* evokes both approaches. Ravel relies on the listener's knowledge of serenade conventions to create musical expectations, which the tempo, harmony, and thematic character undermine in the work's first few measures. In the opening section, meter is strictly articulated, but rhythmic and

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<sup>513</sup> Manuel Rosenthal, interview with Roger Nichols in *Ravel Remembered*, 62-63.

<sup>514</sup> Alfred Cortot, *Musique française de piano*, vol. 2 (Paris: Éditions Rieder, 1932), 23.

<sup>515</sup> Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 44.

metric disjunctions pervade most of what follows. Through this student work, Ravel learned that the materials of convention could be marshaled to contain the grotesque's sprawling tendencies, like a vine buttressed by a garden wall.

In *L'Heure espagnole*, the overture's metric irregularities are framed by the steady chronometric ticking of quarter notes: a musical herald of the characters' conflicting temporal experiences, unfolding in the same homogeneous hour of clock time. The opera's vertiginous characterization of time recurs in the pantomime of *Daphnis et Chloé*, where multiple layers of temporal and dramatic enactment figure the process of the composer at his desk, assimilating, and thus transforming, the past. In the "Danse grotesque," Dorcon's archaism evokes the temporal displacement that confronts all viewers of art; his music—an inept parody from a "sincere" composer—transgresses the rhythmic irregularity typical of this ballet.

*La Valse* does not contain an explicitly grotesque reference in its title or critical accoutrements. However, its reception history, harmonic tensions, rhythmic/metric disjunctions, and whirling *vertige* all suggest a perceptual duality subsumed by its grotesque effect. The approach taken in *La Valse* points toward future methodological applications that combine this dissertation's motivating analytical principles and its manner of exegesis with analyses of Ravel's music free from their evidentiary function. Rather than illuminating an aesthetic proof, the music may act within a domain of aesthetic play in which the grotesque is one of many participants—an approach that directly benefits works like *Gaspard* and

*L'Enfant*. The works of Poe remain a critical juncture for Ravel's grotesque and his desire for formal and aesthetic unity throughout his career.

In Poe's "William Wilson," the title character meets a schoolboy who shares his name, age, birth date, and physical attributes. These resemblances alone are irritating enough, but the double's ability to imitate Wilson's walk and mannerisms makes him even more insufferable. After Wilson leaves his prep school, a lifestyle of gambling, drinking, and lavish spending dulls his senses and clouds the memory of his childhood double. Yet one night, while playing cards at Oxford, the double arrives, revealing Wilson's scheme to dupe another student out of his personal fortune. He continues to pursue Wilson around the world, interfering with all activities extravagant, dishonest, or licentious. Confronting the double at a Carnival masquerade, Wilson finally stabs him repeatedly with a sword—only to turn around and notice his own pale and bloody image in a mirror. Tossing aside his mask, the double—who looks nothing like Wilson—says, "*You have conquered, and I yield....In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.*"<sup>516</sup>

For Wilson, the collision of dual psyches tortures the self's sense of unity, leading to a strange form of suicide. The multiplication of the self need not have such destructive consequences, however: things turn out well for Giglio Fava, the actor described by Baudelaire in Hoffmann's "The Princess Brambilla," whose dualities are generative, leading him to experience new adventures and, finally, to a happy ending

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<sup>516</sup> Poe, "William Wilson," in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 641.

with his bride. Hannoosh describes this Baudelairean brand of duality as *dédoublement*:

The dualism of the comic artist becomes the source of a peculiarly modern unity, the artist's capacity for *dédoublement*, that is, to be simultaneously self and other....The "wholeness" of the self is created by division in the ironic self, which transcends dualism by entering fully into it,...This is the doubling of the comic artist enacted for the benefit of the audience, the self-generating and self-reflexive experience of the *flâneur* in a "communion" with the crowd.<sup>517</sup>

Ravel spent much of his professional career addressing claims that his music valued artifice over sincerity; his aesthetic pronouncements were rare but penetrating insights into a personality exasperated by limiting binarisms. His critics typically conflated the perceived artificiality of his work with the insincerity of its creator, and Ravel responded to these charges in kind, using the language of ethics to describe the world of art. On some level, though, he may have felt that the debate held little meaning: what was the purpose of assessing the sincerity of an artist when the artistic self is a fusion of ever multiplying dualities? The perception of Ravel endlessly wearing and swapping masks suggests a dissembling posture that is inconsistent with the ironic, divided self who transgresses the limits of singular personality by absorbing the characteristics of others. This type of self is a porous creation that never attains completion, its vicissitudes fixing it in the perpetual present; as past selves transforms present ones, dual temporalities converge.

The grotesque in Ravel's work may reflect his aesthetic engagement with art generally, avoiding the limitations of both sincerity and artifice in favor of a

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<sup>517</sup> Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature*, 5.



paradoxical unity forged through disjunction. To ask questions of sincerity is to fix the artistic self to a single point in time, like a dot on a line, instead of recognizing the Bergsonian flow of the artist's consciousness, which weaves the past (through memory) and the future (through anticipation) into the present moment—the only moment that exists. If sincerity implies the congruity of art and self, as Ravel seemed to believe, then it can never exist; the artist's fluctuating dualities ensure that he will relate differently to the work at any given moment, creating an eternal present that artist and artwork together inhabit. When composing, the process is similar: Ravel's fascination with the past meets his forward-seeking novelty in the present act of creation. In this moment of temporal convergence and inexpressible *vertige*, Ravel senses the effect he strives to achieve, but cannot name. He is swept away by the maelstrom.

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